

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE THREE PARALLEL CASES

CASE II: THE KNIGHT'S CIPHER





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
THREE PARALLEL CASES**

Case II: The Knight's Cipher

Three possible cases are available to The Three Investigators on the same days... in parallel! But which one will occur? Can an inconspicuous toppling of a drinking glass determine the course of events? In this particular case, which may or may not happen, Bob studies a mystical cipher from medieval times in order to decode a series of strange graffiti characters. Together with Jupiter and Pete, he unravels a message that a mysterious person uses to threaten a group of people to reveal the truth about an event that happened a long time ago.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Three Parallel Cases
Case II: The Knight's Cipher

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*Die drei ??? und der dreiTag
[B] Im Zeichen der Ritter*

*(The Three ??? and the Three-Day)
[B] Under the Sign of the Knights)*

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1. A Drinking Glass Topples

“Are you done with the report?” Jupiter sipped impatiently on his glass of Coke.

The Three Investigators sat in Jill’s Place—a cosy western-style fast food restaurant in downtown Rocky Beach. The rays of the afternoon sun fell through the huge window front, which stretched almost around the entire building.

Bob replied with an affirmative ‘hmm’ but did not allow himself to be distracted. The investigator responsible for records and research was about to finish jotting down the notes of their just-concluded case. Without a computer, he did so by hand in his notebook.

“Now don’t rush him,” Pete said. “After all, this was one of the most difficult cases in the history of our agency.”

“Yes, but I’m hungry!” Jupiter demonstratively stroked his fat belly. Once again he glanced longingly at the neighbouring tables, from which the seductive smell of the hamburgers that Jill’s Place was famous for drifted across the room.

Jupiter’s mouth watered at the thought of all these grilled delicacies. All the hamburger creations in Jill’s Place were named after famous characters from western movies—the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese; the Cogburn Chicken with hearty mayonnaise; the Double Chisum with extra beef, bacon and fried onions; the hellishly hot Django Chilli; and of course, Jill’s Dream with the famous McBain special sauce...

“Don’t forget... we’re also here to celebrate the huge bargain I got at the garage sale earlier,” Jupe added.

Pete grinned. “That film projector really got to you, Jupe. Anyway, Mrs Sullivan was probably glad to get rid of it.”

The face of the First Investigator brightened up suddenly. “A genuine Novalux T-800,” he said ecstatically. “Over thirty years old and still looks as good as new. And for just five dollars—that’s what I call luck!”

“What do you want to do with such an old projector?” Pete asked.

“These projectors are pretty rare and worth quite a bit,” Jupe replied. “If it’s working, I just need to clean it up; if not, I’ll try to fix it. Anyway, I hope to sell it for a lot more than I paid for—”

“—Which will be handed over to the police on Friday. Report complete!” Bob put his pencil down, beaming. “So, fellas, that concludes our case for the day.”

Shaking his head, Pete skimmed the report. “Boy, that was really crazy. The names alone confuse me.”

“Well, it’s over now,” Jupiter replied succinctly. He was obviously keen to move on to the next item on the agenda as quickly as possible. “And now that the report is done, we can finally turn to the menu!”

Bob grabbed hold of the menu, which was in the shape of an oversized sheriff’s star, and leafed through it.

“Hey! I want to order first,” Jupe exclaimed.

“No way,” Bob argued. “You two had all the time to look at the menu when I was finishing up the report, but you didn’t... so I’m ordering first.”

“How come there is only one copy of the menu at our table?” Pete wondered.

At that moment, the mobile phone in Jupiter's pocket rang. "Why is somebody calling now when I'm so hungry..." He sighed and hurriedly rummaged through his pocket for his mobile phone.

"I'll go get another copy of the menu..." Pete turned looking. "Ah, there's one over there on that vacant table." The Second Investigator hastily got up and bumped against the table causing Jupiter's almost-full glass to sway dangerously.

"Aaaargh!" In a spontaneous response, Bob reached forward and grabbed the glass. "Oh gosh!"

Startled, Pete exclaimed: "Phew... thanks, Bob. That was close!"

"Pete, why are you so clumsy?" Bob remarked while giving Pete a nasty look.

Jupiter, meanwhile, had an amused grin on his face, as he answered the call. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking..."

Pete decided to sit back down as Bob pondered slowly over the menu.

"Yes, hmm..." Jupe continued. "On your wall? ... In red paint? ... And you're sure it's not just a childish prank by some teenagers? ..."

Bob was listening to Jupe's conversation. He drew his eyebrows together thoughtfully. He thought for a moment and reached for the *Rocky Beach Today* newspaper on the table. He frantically flipped through the newspaper, skimmed the headlines and then held an open page under Jupiter's nose. "Jupe, here! Look!"

"I see..." Jupiter was visibly irritated. "Er... just a moment please, sir..." he turned to Bob. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Here, it's even reported in the papers!" Bob said as he tapped on an inconspicuous little article in the newspaper. "There have been several cases of graffiti in recent days!"

Jupiter skimmed the short article. "Er, hello, Mr Bush, sorry for the little interruption... Yes, we understand that the strange graffiti seems to be part of a chain of similar incidents. If you could give me your contact details, I'll discuss with my colleagues and get back to you very soon." Jupe got out a pen and wrote something on a clean paper napkin, and then he ended the call.

Meanwhile, Bob stared at the newspaper article, lost in thought. Line by line he read the article again, as if he could elicit more information from it in this way. He pondered what the writer of the newspaper article meant by 'graffiti in geometric shapes' as there was no accompanying photo with the report.

"Jupe, what was that all about?" Pete asked.

"You remember Bush TV at Sheldon Street?" Jupe said. "The owner, Mr Bush, said that his shop wall had been defaced by graffiti and would like us to investigate."

Pete looked at him in amazement. "What's the big deal about some graffiti? Did Mr Bush hire the right people? Isn't graffiti more a case for a cleaning company? Besides, we're graffiti artists ourselves."

"We? Why us?" Bob looked at him in amazement.

"Well," Pete grinned, "just think how many times we have drawn question marks somewhere with our chalk! Anyway graffiti are everywhere nowadays."

"I wouldn't say that, Pete," Bob quietly explained to his friend. "Graffiti has been rare in Rocky Beach so far. Yesterday, a house on Old Malibu Road was defaced, and now, Bush TV's is probably the third case of this kind in a row!"

"Anyway, are we agreeable to take on this case?" Jupe asked and Bob agreed immediately.

"Well, graffiti is okay with me," Pete said. "At least it is not something eerie."

Jupe called Mr Bush back to arrange for a meeting.

“Before we get any further on this,” Jupe said after the call, “let’s get something to eat first. I’m famished!”

“Okay,” Bob said, “it’s your turn to order.” He passed the menu to Pete and said: “Be careful not to knock over anything else, you clumsy clot! People are looking over at us.”

“Oh yeah? Who?” Pete asked.

“Over there on your left,” Bob said. “That blonde girl sitting there with the elderly lady. They were pointing at us—obviously amused with your clumsiness.”

“Oh well,” Pete remarked and began to laugh heartily to earn scathing looks from his friend.

2. Graffiti in Geometric Shapes

A good hour later, after the three of them had eaten a few hot brownies with vanilla ice cream to top it off, they were full. Jupiter paid the bill, and they made their way to Pete's red MG to proceed to Mr Bush's place. The address he had given them was in the commercial area of Sheldon Street.

Although the Second Investigator had his car parked halfway in the shade, it was unbearable when they got into it. Moaning, Jupiter fanned himself with an old brochure. He really had nothing against the famous Californian summer weather, but this blazing heat was simply unbearable. The air that streamed through the open windows into the interior of the car hardly cooled them down at all. With merciless power, the sun burned down from the sky, where no cloud had shown up for what felt like an eternity.

During the past days, the temperatures had risen steadily, but there still seemed to be room for improvement. On this Wednesday in July, the thermometer showed a proud 35 degrees Celsius and not the slightest breeze blew over the country from the smooth Pacific. Even the birds flew around sporadically. Most of them sought shady spots in the tree tops during the day.

The only consolation was that the meteorologist had predicted heavy thunderstorms for Friday. This was not only what the coastal dwellers were longing for, the parched forests were also in desperate need of water. Fortunately, there were no devastating forest fires, but the danger grew with each additional dry day.

Moaning, Bob wiped his T-shirt across his forehead which was glistening with beads of sweat. "Your car is a rolling oven, Pete. You can cook a pizza in here!"

"Yeah, sure, unlike your cool Beetle. The shape alone tells us it's a mobile igloo..." Pete mocked.

"It's over there," Jupiter interrupted, pointing to the TV shop.

Pete parked a few metres from the street corner where the single-storey shop house stood. From the looks of it, its best years were long behind it. The brown paint was peeling off in countless places, the old wooden windows were dirty and the frames looked fragile. The main entrance, like the shop window, was secured by rusty rolling grilles. Behind the grilles, dry leaves and some rubbish were piled up. Above the door, the words 'Bush TV—Since 1971' were written in barely legible letters.

Four other characters, however, stood out all the more clearly as The Three Investigators slowly approached the shop. They were red and emblazoned on the left side of the store front.



"Aha!" Pete muttered. "This doesn't look like the typical graffiti of random characters and colours we see elsewhere."

Bob agreed with his friend. "Graffiti in geometric shapes," he remarked, "just like what the newspaper report described."

A friendly-looking, stocky man with loopy white hair stood on the sidewalk in front of the shop. He wore a colourful Hawaiian shirt with a palm tree motif and an equally colourful but checked shorts.

"I wonder if that's Mr Bush," Pete asked.

"Of course he is, Pete," Jupe replied. "When there's an elderly gentleman standing in front of a TV shop founded in 1971 whose clothes are from an equally old TV series, the two go together."

Bob wasn't sure if Jupiter was once again trying to impress his colleagues with a combination of keen observation and deductive skills or if he was simply pulling their legs for a change.

"Hello, boys! You must be The Three Investigators," the man called out.

"Yes, we're the three sweaty investigators," Pete added.

"Glad you could come so quickly."

"May I give you our card?" Jupiter pulled a card out of his trouser pocket and handed it to Mr Bush. The card said:



Walter Bush accepted the card and looked at it curiously. "What do the three question marks stand for?"

Now Jupiter was really in his element. "The question mark is a symbol for the unknown, for unanswered questions, and unsolved riddles. Our job is to answer questions, solve riddles and unravel mysteries of all kinds."

"Aha," Mr Bush said after a moment's hesitation. He could be seen to be impressed by this comprehensive answer. "With such a sophisticated publicity stunt, my TV repair business would probably not have steadily declined."

"I suppose you closed your shop four years ago?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes, four..." Surprised, Mr Bush looked at Jupiter. "How do you know that?"

The First Investigator pointed to a yellowed poster that was dimly visible behind the dull shop window. "That old poster there. It indicates a movie festival on Friday 13 October." Mr Bush let his gaze wander to the notice while Jupiter continued speaking: "The last Friday with this date was—counting a leap year—four years ago!"

"Well deduced!" Mr Bush pursed his lips appreciatively. "Well... you know, the shop hasn't been doing so well for years. Technology doesn't stand still and the shop could have done with modernising, but unfortunately my son didn't want to take over the business. That's why at some point, I had no other choice."

"Do you live here in this shop house?" asked Pete.

"Yes. Although I no longer run a business, I still stay here. There's also a house at the back, and my son lives there."

Bob pointed to the wall of the shop. "Let's get to the reason for your call. It's about these graffiti here?"

“Right.”

“When did you discover them?”

“Yesterday morning... but only today I thought that they might mean something. That’s why I called you.”

“Hmm... do you have any clue as to what they mean?” asked Pete.

“No, it doesn’t mean anything to me at all.”

While Mr Bush was still talking, footsteps approached. Pete nudged Bob in the ribs and pointed to a group of youths coming towards them. There were three boys and a girl, all about the same age, who strolled leisurely towards them. The tallest one of them seemed to be the leader. With his dark curls, broad shoulders and mirrored sunglasses, he could easily have stepped out of a surfer magazine. He casually had his arm wrapped around a blonde girl.

“Hey, Mr Bush, you all right?” the tall boy called out as he stroked his red T-shirt with his free hand, to clearly emphasize his muscles.

“Yes, yes,” Mr Bush replied, a little bit intimidated.

Then the girl snapped her fingers and pointed at Jupiter. “Hey, now I recognize you! You’re that fat boy who lives in a dump!”

Jupiter noticed how the gang leader looked at him with a piercing gaze, despite the sunglasses. “Listen, fatso...”

“Oh come on, Steve—leave him alone. Let’s not create trouble today!” The girl had put her hand on his shoulder and seemed to want to calm him down.

Steve hesitated briefly, exchanged another glance with the two other boys behind. Then he pinched his girlfriend’s hip. “All right, Laury. Your wish is my command...”

“Come on.” She pulled him by the sleeve and they walked on.

When they were out of earshot, Mr Bush breathed a sigh of relief. “Very unpleasant people...”

“Have you ever had any trouble with them?” asked Pete.

“No, not really.”

Throughout this encounter, Jupiter had maintained his composure by ignoring the youth’s insults and threatening gestures. Now he frowned. “Are they around here often? Maybe they have something to do with the graffiti?”

Bob meanwhile went to the wall of the shop and examined the graffiti up close. “Back to these characters. They are definitely unusual.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter joined him and eyed the red characters as well.

“This first three characters are V’s with the pointy end at different directions—left, down and up,” Pete said. “The fourth reminds me of the shape of the paper kites we used to fly on the beach, but this kite is pointing downwards.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter growled and began to pinch his lower lip. He always did that when he was thinking hard. “The position of the three V’s could mean something.”

In the meantime, Bob had pulled out his notepad and copied down the four characters.

“So you think the characters could really mean something?” Mr Bush scratched his head.

“I’m sure we’ll know soon enough,” Bob said.

“Then you’ll take the case?” asked Mr Bush, looking hopefully at Jupiter.

“With pleasure, Mr Bush,” Jupiter replied.

“Great, thank you, guys!”

Jupiter then turned to Mr Bush and said: “Okay, Mr Bush, I think we can take it from here. If we have any questions, we will call you. We will also inform you of the progress of our investigation.”

“Thanks, boys,” the man said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some chores to do.”

“Sure, Mr Bush!” Jupe said.

Mr Bush went back in and closed the door.

“So how are we going to start from here?” Pete asked.

“Fellas, I’d better go to the library and see if I can find anything about these characters,” Bob said.

“Very good, Bob,” Jupe said.

“How are you going to do that?” asked Pete sceptically. “You can’t enter a character like that into a search engine using your keyboard, can you?”

“Research requires more than just a search engine,” Bob replied with a mysterious undertone. “Anyway, how about you take a photo of these characters for our records.”

“Okay.” Pete took a digital camera out of his backpack and pressed the power button. However, nothing moved. He tried it three more times, but the device was silent and the lens was locked.

“Oh, no. Jupe,” Pete gasped.

The First Investigator turned to his friend in astonishment. “What?”

“Well, here!” Frustrated, Pete passed the camera to Jupe. “It has stopped working again. It went out, just like that! You said you were going to take care of it!”

In terms of repair work, Jupiter was extremely talented. In the past, he had overcome numerous electronic problems and mastered almost hopeless repairs. This often saved Uncle Titus from having to hire expensive specialists when technical difficulties arose at the salvage yard. Moreover, many of the discarded devices that Jupiter had found had already been brought back to life through his efforts.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry.” The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. “Somehow something always came up. You know how busy it’s been this week.”

Frowning, Jupiter took the stubborn device and looked at it from all sides. “It’s probably a contact problem in the battery compartment. Just a moment...”

Jupiter took out the batteries and put them back again. Within a short moment, there was a familiar humming sound.

“Voilà!” Grinning, Jupiter gave the camera back to his friend. “You just need an expert, and then you’ll be fine.”

“Especially when the expert is an incredibly lucky man,” Pete growled softly, grabbed the camera and took the first photos. Then he examined the result in the small display—a difficult task in the glaring sunlight.

The First Investigator proceeded to examine the graffiti up close. “It’s a red spray paint.”

“Maybe we should scrape off some paint to examine it,” Pete suggested.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jupiter replied. “The paint probably comes from a commercial spray can from a DIY store.”

“Okay, I’m done with the photos. So what are we going to do while Bob does research in the air-conditioned library?” Pete wiped the sweat from his forehead meaningfully.

“You could look at the other graffitied houses mentioned in the newspaper,” Bob suggested, putting his notepad away.

“Yes, that would have been my suggestion too,” Jupiter replied. “We’ll go to Old Malibu Road. I’d be very interested to see if the graffiti there look the same...”

“Bob, I’ll drop you off at the dusty catacombs,” Pete said. “It’s far too dry and warm here for a bookworm anyway.”

“That’s right! And if I have to look for you afterwards in Rocky Beach, it’s a piece of cake. Always follow the question mark-shaped puddles of sweat!” Bob grinned and the three of them headed back to Pete’s MG.

3. An Old Acquaintance

In the car, Bob sat at the back seat looking at the characters he copied in his notepad. His thoughts were running at full speed.

The characters reminded him of something and he was sure he had seen them before. But no matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn't think of where it might have been. In a newspaper? On television? Maybe on the Internet? And in what context could it have been? Every now and then, he scribbled short keywords on his notepad, short snippets of thoughts that he hoped would perhaps lead him on the right track in the library. Bob was full of impatience. He was all geared up to look through books and find these strange characters.

Fifteen minutes later, they reached the building where Bob was familiar with—its entrance flanked by thick columns supporting the imposing gable. How many hours had he already spent here, inquisitively browsing through old books or assisting the head of the library, Carol Bennett, in a part-time job.

He jumped up the stairs, taking two steps at a time, and pushed open the door. Suddenly, the familiar cosiness inside the cool rooms enveloped him. The postings on the notice board, the call for a reading competition, the annoying beeps at the circulation desk, where an obviously new member of staff was struggling with the pitfalls of electronics and an impatient user—Bob was only peripherally aware of all this as he walked purposefully in the direction of the book shelves.

Miss Bennett sat behind her desk and looked up. "Bob! A vole is all we need today!"

"A what?" Bob stopped, puzzled. A vole? He knew what events could be dangerous for libraries or archives. A fire or a flood were capable of completely destroying a collection, but mice, rats and other rodents also threatened the precious paper. The idea of picking up a book and leafing through nibbled pages did not appeal to him at all.

"The vole is you, of course," Miss Bennett giggled. "If you're so deep in thought that you don't notice anything or anyone when you come in and don't even introduce yourself to our new trainee, then it's something serious. Before long, you'll be engrossed in the reference books..."

Bob bit his lower lip. How embarrassing. Where had his good manners gone? He squinted at the circulation desk. Fortunately, the young lady didn't notice him.

"Uh, yeah. I'd better catch up on that..." he mumbled.

"Anyway, Patricia is busy and will be here until 6 pm," Miss Bennett said. "You probably are too, depending on how extensive your research turns out to be."

"Yes, it depends... If I have to interpret some mysterious characters, it can take a long time."

"Well. When you hear a mysterious bell, you know that the library closes in fifteen minutes."

Bob liked Miss Bennett's tongue-in-cheek humour. He grinned, took the first steps towards one of the shelves, but then stopped abruptly and turned to the librarian. "Were you going to ask me something?"

"Excuse me?"

“Well... usually you ask me if I have time to fix the binding on some books or something.”

Miss Bennett smiled. “Let’s see, maybe Patricia will ask you to assist her later...”

“Sure, I’ll help her if I’m still here.” Then he took long strides into the shadowy world of bookshelves.

Jupiter and Pete drove directly to Old Malibu Road, which was close to the beach and therefore not far from the Crenshaws’ house. Here, as it had been reported in the newspaper, another building had been attacked by graffiti vandals. They had quickly found the building built of red bricks that are typical in this part of the small coastal city. Resourceful building companies had constructed several buildings on the site of a cement factory that had been demolished years ago.

“Here we are.” Pete said as he parked his MG in the shade of a dense eucalyptus bush and opened the door. Immediately the tropical heat wafted into the interior of the car.

“Hopefully. The weather fairy on TV has promised cooling down for tomorrow,” Jupiter said. “This heat is not exactly conducive to people of my stature.”

In the shade of a large cherry tree, four red characters were visible on the dark bricks below a window.



Pete took out the camera, switched it on and compared the characters with the shots snapped at Mr Bush’s place. “One of the characters is the same—the inverted ‘V’. Now we also have three new characters—a ‘V’ with a dot in it; a kite pointing to the left; and a triangle pointing to the right.”

“Hmm... but the style is identical as they have similar geometrical shapes.” Jupiter walked closer to the wall and crouched down to look at the graffiti. “The characters are of the same size and are also at about the same height as those at the TV shop. Besides, it’s the same red spray paint.”

“I’ll take a photo of it,” Pete said, “but right now, all I can see is your neck.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Hey, you!” a raspy voice growled behind them at that moment. “What are you doing here?”

Surprised, Jupiter and Pete turned around and looked into the wrinkled, angry face of an old man whose sweeping full white beard did not fit him at all. “Keep your hands off the wall, you’re destroying the traces!”

He stood not two metres from them, waving a walking stick menacingly in the air. His faded, formerly blue overalls were at least thirty years old. He wore a worn-out vest and heavy work shoes. The man did not seem to want to take off his work clothes even in retirement.

“Traces?” asked Pete incredulously.

“That’s right. Traces! I hired a detective to find out who did this!” the old man clamoured in a smoky voice. “And that’s why you’re not touching anything here. Go away now!”

Jupiter calmly and emphatically took a step towards the man, who immediately raised his stick again. “Excuse me, sir,” he said. “Is this house yours?”

“That’s right,” the man barked and gasped excitedly. His face—or at least the part of it that was not overgrown with the wild beard—was now turning red. He stared at the First Investigator hostilely. “I said get out of here! Or I’ll come after you with my cane!”

“Are you bothered by these greenhorns?” Completely unnoticed, another person ran up to them, puffing and panting.

Jupiter turned, caught sight of the man and groaned. “Dick Perry!”

“The one and only...” The bulbous detective came to a sweaty halt, smiled smugly at the group and dabbed at his forehead with a stained handkerchief. He was slightly shorter than Jupiter and was not wearing the most fashionable clothes. The shirt looked dingy and the khaki corduroy trousers were soiled at the knee.

The old man turned to the detective and asked: “You know these boys here?”

“I sure do. We have met several times before,” Dick Perry said and then turned to Jupiter and Pete. “If I’m looking at the situation correctly, I have a mission here. You two, on the other hand—”

“We just wanted to have a look at the graffiti here!” Pete interrupted him emphatically and cheerfully, although he could not avoid sounding decidedly indignant.

Dick Perry just grinned at him in amusement. “This is out of your league, guys. Graffiti on the wall need an experienced hand.” Perry announced and turned to the old man, who was still wiggling his cane uneasily. “Mr Quinn?”

“That’s right! I’ve been waiting for you, Mr Perry.”

Dick Perry let his gaze wander past the man to the spray-painted wall.

“Come on...” Mr Quinn reached for Perry’s hand and pulled him aside. “I have a few things to tell you.”

“Good! And for you boys...” Perry looked condescendingly at Jupiter and Pete. “You better go play baseball or whatever you should be doing. Leave this job to a professional, and by that, I mean me!”

“Well, listen! We’re on public property!” Pete said angrily, putting his hands on his hips. He couldn’t see why that annoying detective wanted to drive them out of here.

“Watch your words, boy!” the old man interfered. “You’re lucky I don’t ask you to delete those photos you took! This house is my property! None of this is any of your business!”

Immediately the old man threatened them again with his raised stick. “Now get out of here!”

4. Alien

Bob had gathered more than three dozen books from the shelves—simply everything he thought could help him. That included secret scripts and codes, worldly symbols, coats of arms and ornaments.

Very soon, at a long table in the reading room, he was completely absorbed in the books and the world around him seemed to stand still. He did not hear the soft clatter of the computer keyboard at Miss Bennett's desk, nor the occasional electronic noise at the circulation desk. Neither was he aware that he was sitting there all alone and had spread out the books on the table further than he should be entitled to. He continued to leaf through old folios, frequently jotting down something in his notebook, and in the process, he must have already turned over thousands of pages, but so far, without success.

"You're Bob the researcher and archivist, right?"

Startled, Bob closed the book in his left hand with a loud bang. The girl from the circulation desk, who seemed to have appeared beside him out of nowhere, flinched. Bob drew in the air through his teeth. "Sorry. That was one of the deadly sins you can commit in a library..."

"You mean talking to someone?"

"No. Using a book as a firecracker." He put the volume aside and looked questioningly at Patricia, though mostly, he wondered to himself how long he had actually been sitting here poring over the books.

Patricia grinned. "I'm sorry as I didn't mean to disturb you." Curious, she glanced at the title of the book Bob had been engrossed in—*Secret Ciphers: An Analysis of 160 Different Ciphers*. "I don't have anything to do right now. All the books are fixed or shelved and... Miss Bennett said I could certainly learn something about careful research from my predecessor."

Predecessor? That sounded as if it had been decades ago. "Well, it's one thing to be meticulous. You know, on the way here I was thinking about all sorts of books that might have the information I want. Half my notebook is scribbled all over. Anyway, I went through one book after another."

Patricia sat down next to him. "That alone sounds complicated—like multitasking on a computer."

"You said it... but this multitasking gets more and more confusing the longer you go into it because each book holds more clues and pushes you in a new direction as you struggle to get an overview of the whole thing."

"How many concrete leads do you have so far?"

"Not a single one." Bob was anything but comfortable admitting this to himself... but perhaps Patricia would bring a breath of fresh air to the search. He dug out the piece of paper with the graffiti characters and showed her what he was looking for.

"I see. To find such characters... without any other clue... isn't that hopeless?"

"Yes and no." Bob hoped that this had not sounded too precocious—as it often did with Jupiter. "Because you're looking for illustrations of these characters. So you can search through the books more quickly and don't have to read through pages of text."

“But still no progress?”

Bob nodded. “I have a dark suspicion that a certain book is not here—a book that I’ve had in my hands a few times over the last few years and borrowed several times... a book that could possibly answer all my questions right now... and which I should have found a long time ago.”

“Aha!” Patricia looked at him questioningly and began to smile mischievously. “But you don’t recall any part of the book title?”

At that moment, the book appeared in Bob’s mind’s eye clearly and distinctly! “*Symbols and Characters: A History of Cryptography*—that must be it! Yes, of course!” He pushed the chair back and was about to jump up when he noticed Patricia looking at him, aghast. “What is it?”

“*Symbols and Characters: A History of Cryptography*?” she repeated tonelessly.

“Yes, exactly! Have you seen that book lately? Or was it loaned out?”

“Uh... actually,” she murmured. “I remembered Miss Bennett removed that ancient book from the shelves last week. The reference book from which you hope to get your riddle solved has been... discarded!”

Jupiter looked at the old man in disbelief. Then he turned to Pete, who was obviously about to say something in reply. “Let it go, Pete. We’re going. Goodbye!”

“There you go!” the old man remarked, triumphantly holding onto the straps of his overalls. There was no mistaking his sneer. The two boys turned and walked back to the sidewalk. Behind them they could still hear Dick Perry talking: “You were saying on the phone about... some visitors?”

Pete was boiling inside. “Dick Perry alone is already exhausting. On top of that, that old man had to be so rude—”

“Don’t get upset,” Jupiter tried to calm him down. He, too, could not stand such patronising behaviour on the part of adults. He had often countered such belittling behaviour with acting tricks and eloquent retorts, and many snooty adults had been left breathless afterwards. This time, however, Jupiter had preferred to back down. “The old man is just trying to make a name for himself. Finally, something happens in his street and he is promptly the centre of attention.”

“And they always say that young people have no decency anymore,” Pete remarked.

“Anyway, we have our photos after all!” Jupiter said. “That’s the main thing.”

“Well, all right. How about we go get some nice cold drinks?” He pointed to the small drinks shop across the road. “Perhaps we could ask Mr Raynes over there to tell us something. He always knows what’s going on around here.”

“Very good idea!” said Jupiter. “To be more precise—two very good ideas!”

They quickly crossed the street and went to the small low-rise building. Through a glass swinging door, they entered the air-conditioned shop, where there were no other customers. The interior was simple and functional. There were different kinds of water and lemonade, beers, but also speciality beverages from all over the world, lined up on the wall in metal shelves.

Mr Raynes, a tall man in his mid-forties, sat relaxed behind the small cash register reading a newspaper. When he saw the two boys approaching, he smiled. “Ah, Pete Crenshaw and Jupiter Jones. So... what are you hunting today? A genie?”

Pete smiled back and stepped up to the small counter. “Then I would be a bit more tense... because I have a thing about ghosts. No, we were just in the neighbourhood and—”

“—Got in the way of old Quinn, huh?” Mr Raynes interrupted him. “I could see him waving his cane at you two.”

Jupiter grinned to himself. In this neighbourhood, everyone seemed to have an eye on everyone else. And reading newspapers as a cover was something he knew from cheap crime novels. “No wonder. Through the glass door you have an ideal view of his house over there,” Jupiter remarked.

“Did you want to question him? About the strange graffiti? If I’m not wrong, you’re always dealing with strange things like that!”

“Well, I’m afraid it wasn’t a very refreshing conversation...” Jupiter said.

The beverage seller chuckled. “Then he didn’t tell you what he said he saw there last night?”

“No... what?” Jupiter’s curiosity was suddenly aroused.

“Strange. He’s telling everyone around here!” Mr Raynes rose and gestured out the door. “After Jackson’s Bakery, his house was the second target... and he’s totally proud of being the only one who saw the artist do his work.”

With a nod of his head, Mr Raynes greeted a customer who had just stepped through the door. She was a chubby little woman in her early forties and was now grabbing some bottles from a shelf into a wicker basket.

“He saw him?” asked Pete, puzzled.

“So he says!” Raynes turned to the woman who had stepped up to the cash register and punched in some numbers. “That will be eight dollars fifty, Miss Tomkins.”

While Miss Tomkins was still rummaging in her purse, Mr Raynes turned back to Pete and Jupiter. “I, on the other hand, think old Quinn’s just had another drink.”

“Why?” asked Pete. “Did he get his drink here?”

For a moment, there was silence. Then Mr Raynes burst out laughing. “Good one!”

The shop owner gave the lady her change and waited until she was outside again. Jupiter had the feeling that Miss Tomkins was happy to leave the shop.

“Anyway,” Mr Raynes continued, “he now feels insanely important! He thinks he’s the most important witness in town!”

“What exactly did he see?” Gradually, the First Investigator became restless.

With both hands, Mr Raynes propped himself up on his newspaper, leaned forward, looked at Jupiter and Pete in turn and lowered his voice. “An alien!”

Pete winced briefly. He suddenly felt uncomfortable. “An... alien?”

“Yes! A figure dressed in white, prowling the street at night.” Raynes paused for a moment. “Had a very misshapen head, supposedly... and a red cross on his robe or whatever he was wearing.”

“Strange,” Jupiter mumbled while pinching his lower lip.

“A red cross?” Pete wavered between unease and perplexity. “Surely that was just a doctor on his way home.”

Again Mr Raynes laughed uproariously.

5. Evidence Erased

“Discarded?” Miss Bennett sat at her desk, clicking her tongue and giving her trainee a playfully reproofing look. “Patricia, dirty, damaged and no longer usable books are discarded... but this is usually the very last step that librarians take when cleaning up their collection...”

“It’s the library’s responsibility to ensure that the collection is up-to-date and responsive to community needs—otherwise it will just grow out of hand!” Bob smiled and pattered his feet nervously. “However, for material that is removed, there are several ways to handle them afterwards.”

“What we do is weeding,” Miss Bennett explained to Patricia. “First, we remove the material from the shelves. If they are in poor condition, we may repair or rebind them and then return them back to the shelves. If they are deemed no longer suitable in this library, they are sent to other libraries or will be offered for sale to the public. Only as a last resort, we will discard them.”

Patricia groaned. “This is worse than school!”

“Well, my colleague Pete would have run away by now,” Bob chuckled.

“Okay, okay, so you only say ‘discard’ when a book is really going to the trash,” Patricia moaned. “So we didn’t discard that book, but where is it?”

“Well, it should be where it should be—in the back room,” Miss Bennett said. “I put it aside for the next book sale, and Bob, you are in luck, you get to purchase it today... for fifty cents... if you can find it!”

Patricia accompanied Bob to the back room. Together they searched the rows of shelves but did not find anything immediately until Patricia pulled out a small book whose spine was made entirely of tape and whose makeshift lettering was barely legible. Bob recognized his own writing. He himself had rebound this book years ago. In the meantime, the adhesive strips had come loose and their chemical substances had long since begun to attack the binding and also the paper.

Bob felt the old, worn paper between his fingers. Hastily he turned the pages and only a few seconds later, they both saw the geometric characters Bob was looking for.

“Bingo! We found it!” he exclaimed and looked at Patricia. “You did really well... Thank you very much!”

Mr Raynes’s laughter was still ringing in their ears as Jupiter and Pete left the drinks shop. They looked across the street and there was no sign of Dick Perry and Mr Quinn.

“What do you think?” asked Pete, sipping the last drops from his Coke can.

“Think of what?” Jupiter replied.

“The alien? What else?”

“Well... if I’m going to be honest, Pete, I have no idea how we’re going to tackle an alien.”

“I thought you don’t believe that science fiction stuff, do you?” Pete asked.

“Why not? Many theories for the existence of extraterrestrial beings are built on serious foundations,” Jupiter answered in a serious tone. It was obvious that he was making Pete

even more insecure.

“What nonsense,” Pete remarked, seemingly unimpressed. “Aren’t you usually the one who wants to explain everything rationally?”

“Ha!” Jupe laughed. “Even my reasoning process fails in the face of the infinite vastness of space.”

Pete was silent.

“Just imagine if we could provide proof that we are not alone... that there is other life in the universe,” Jupe continued, “honour and glory would be ours.” Then he had to grin after all and received a side blow for it.

“Man, Jupe, you know very well that I don’t like situations like that—especially when you pretend to believe in them,” Pete grunted, but now he had to laugh too. “Go ahead and say it—there are no aliens. Right?”

“The answer would be too simple. After all, no one knows for sure.” Jupiter grinned meaningfully. “But in our case, I am convinced that Mr Quinn could have seen anything... but almost certainly not an alien.”

“Reassuring... but what do we do now?” Pete wondered.

“I thought Mr Raynes mentioned where another graffiti appeared—at Jackson’s Bakery.”

“So we’ll go there next?” Pete assumed.

“Exactly. Bob is probably still busy at the library, so we have plenty of time.”

“The bakery is in Marooney Lane, if I’m not mistaken.”

Pete unlocked the MG and sank into the driver’s seat. Then he started the engine and let the MG roll out of the car park. Over the next few minutes, he steered the car unerringly along less busy side streets through the traffic. Soon, they were driving towards Marooney Lane.

The long-established bakery of the Jackson family was a small shop in the ground floor of an old commercial building on one end of the street. Multicoloured summer motifs were stuck on the shop window and the display behind it was also colourful and cheerful.

Jupiter pointed at the graffiti on the snow-white wall at the side of the shop. As with Mr Bush and Mr Quinn, cryptic characters had been spray-painted in the same red colour.



“And what exactly makes you wonder about this now? It looks just like the others, isn’t it? Only that there are three characters now—a kite, a triangle, and a ‘V’.”

Jupiter pointed to the area to the right of the three characters. “Somehow paint has been smeared here.”

Pete stumbled and looked at the First Investigator. “Do you think that means something?”

“Pete! Surely it means something that three characters have been sprayed on the wall here and that, unlike the other houses, smudged paint can be seen next to it! But what? And what is this machine here?” He pointed to a wheeled, box-shaped device that stood in a small alcove next to the stairs to the front door.

Perplexed, Pete looked first at Jupiter, then back at the graffiti. “I’m going to take a few photos before we get chased away again.”

“Hopefully we don’t have to expect a blow with a walking stick here,” Jupiter murmured quietly.

While Pete was taking the camera out of his backpack, the sliding door of a silver-coloured van parked directly behind them opened. A man in work clothes got out and looked at them in surprise. In his hand, he held a hose with a wide brush mounted on the end.

“What are you doing? Get away from my pressure washer!” he hissed indignantly.

“We didn’t touch anything!” Pete defended himself.

“Excuse me,” Jupiter pointed to the hose, “you intend to clean the wall?”

“Yes, I think so. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Jupiter replied. “However, we would like to take a photo of these characters before you remove them.”

“Photos? I see. Hey, did you spray these here?”

“No, no. Quite the opposite,” Jupiter replied. “We are merely trying to find out who did it!”

“Well, you’re a bit late.” The man grinned cheekily.

“Uh, why?”

“I’ve already cleaned up two of these weird characters. Then I had to fix my hose. It had a hole in it.”

Startled, Jupiter looked at the man. “There were... more characters?”

“Yes, on the right. So, now make way. I have to finish this quick and go to the next place.”

“Aha! That’s why there is the smeared paint on the right,” Jupiter noted and then turned to the man. “Excuse me, sir. Can you remember what the two characters looked like?”

“Red. Boy, do you think I remember all the graffiti I have to remove every day?”

“No, but it is crucial if—”

“They were two triangles, I think.”

“Uh... which direction did they point to?” Jupe continued to probe.

“I can’t remember,” the man said. “Well, they were very similar. Now move aside or you’ll get wet.” Rudely, the man pushed past the two boys and began to connect the hose to the pressure washer.

“Two triangles,” Jupiter murmured softly.

“And what does that tell us?”

“I honestly don’t have the slightest idea.”

“—Which is a pretty rare statement from our First Investigator!” retorted Pete, as he quickly photographed the three remaining characters and both of them ducked to safety from the cleansing foam.

Pete then asked: “And how are we supposed to find the solution if some characters are no longer there?”

6. The Anxious Baker

Bob was still standing at the shelf, skimming the chapter devoted to the mysterious characters, while Patricia was back on duty at the circulation desk.

In no time at all, he read about the origin of the cipher—and was shocked! Too many dark myths and mysteries surrounded the originators of those characters, whose history was only briefly outlined.

Bob got out from the back room and hurried past Miss Bennett back to the library shelves. He had his eyes fixed stubbornly on the books. More intently, he scanned the covers of the books for the word he was looking for. There it was! He pulled out a heavy book, opened it and began to read excitedly.

“Let’s go in and ask if any of the staff can remember what the characters looked like... or if anyone else has any information,” Jupiter said. “Maybe that will get us a step further.”

“Might as well,” Pete said. “I can’t stand the heat out here.”

Pete pushed open the door to the bakery, hastily walked in, and almost collided with a tall girl. She had long blonde curls and was about the same age as him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to barge in like that,” Pete said.

At that moment, the girl’s eyes met Pete’s. A smile spread across her face and she looked at the Second Investigator straight in the eye. “Hey, aren’t you Pete Crenshaw?”

She had a pleasant voice—warm and tender. Pete was confused for a moment, then stuttered sheepishly: “Yes, um... that... that’s me.” The girl was really pretty, he thought and felt his heart pounding. For a few seconds, he thought of Kelly, but the blonde quickly pushed this thought away.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“Weren’t you were at Jill’s Place this morning?” the girl asked.

“Yes, that’s right.” Pete replied. Then he recalled Bob pointing out the girl who was with an elderly lady, and who was looking at him after he bumped into the table. “Oh! Now I remember, you were there as well!”

Immediately, her features brightened. More than that, she laughed. And Pete had to admit that he liked her laughter very much.

“I’m a big fan of yours, you know,” she said and Pete had the feeling that she had just conjured up an even more beautiful, even more beguiling smile.

“A fan?” Pete was puzzled.

“Yes!” She gave a beautiful laugh. “Well, I collect every newspaper article about you and your two investigator friends and... that’s why I know everything about you!”

“Really? Everything?” Pete looked at her searchingly. “I mean everything?”

Hedy nodded.

“Okay, then...” Pete said, and thought for a while. “What’s my favourite dish?”

“Macaroni cheese,” it came straight out of her.

“That’s very impressive.” Pete smiled. “Really... very impressive.”

“You can ask me more difficult questions,” the girl said, and again gave her beautiful laugh.

Meanwhile, Jupiter had ventured into the bakery store and looked around, allowing Pete to have his moment with the girl.

“Hey, I haven’t even introduced myself.” The girl stroked her blonde curls behind her ear, and immediately some strands fell back onto her face. “I am Hedra Carlson.” She reached out to Pete. “But everyone calls me Hedy.”

Pete grabbed her hand. It was warm and soft. “Hello, Hedy! And I’m here with—”

“Jupiter Jones,” Hedy interrupted him. “I know!”

Pete couldn’t take his eyes off Hedy. Feverishly, the Second Investigator thought about what he could say. Time was running out. In a moment, Hedy would give him a friendly nod and say goodbye. He had to prevent that—but he just couldn’t think of how. His head was empty—empty and warm.

Suddenly Hedy said: “May I ask you... something?”

“Sure,” Pete replied happily. “Whatever you want!” He was radiant. She didn’t say goodbye.

“I’m a little uncomfortable...” Hedy said.

“No, you can ask.”

“Would you mind giving me your autograph? For my Pete collection?”

“For your Pete collection?” Once again, the Second Investigator was unable to hide his astonishment.

“Yes. Like I said, I’m collecting everything I can on you and your fellow investigators.” Hedy looked at him uncertainly. “Do you find that... odd?”

“No, no, not at all.” Pete shook his head violently. “You should see the things Bob collects! He’s got folders full of newspaper articles.”

Hedy smiled.

“So, an autograph, huh?” Pete returned to the subject.

“That would be just the greatest thing for me!” Hedy said.

“Yeah, sure. Why not? Do you have a pen? Because I’m afraid I don’t have one.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Hedy handed him a pen. “Here you go. Sorry, I’m all excited.”

“And where should I write on?”

“On your famous business card,” Hedy suggested.

“On our card. Sure. Just a minute...” Pete reached into his trouser pocket and took out one of business cards of The Three Investigators. He signed beside his name on the card and then he handed it to Hedy.

“Here you go.” He felt like a movie star.

“Thank you very, very much, Pete! Great. Really.” Hedy looked at the card, beaming with joy. “Say, are you in the midst of an investigation?”

“Well... yes... uh...” This time Pete returned her gaze and realized that her eyes were both blue and green. He could not remember ever having seen such eyes before. Suddenly he became very warm.

Then an elderly lady walked up behind Hedy and interrupted the magical moment. Pete recognized her as the same lady that was with Hedy at Jill’s Place.

“Come on, Hedy, we have to go,” the lady said. “We still have things to do!”

“Oh, yeah,” Hedy said. “Aunt Julia, this is Pete Crenshaw. Remember? I told you about him and his two investigator friends this morning at Jill’s Place?”

“Oh yes!” Aunt Julia said. “Well, nice to meet you, Pete!”

Pete smiled. “You too, ma’am.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to hold you up!” Hedy smiled one more time. “Hey, why don’t you give me a call...” She took a small piece of paper out of her pocket and scribbled some

numbers on it. Then she pressed it onto Pete's hand. "Here's my number... okay?"

"Yes... uh... I'd love to!" Pete thought he was dreaming. Had this picture-perfect person just given him her phone number? What should he say in reply? "Uh... by the way, my number is at the back of the card..."

"That's great! Gotta go! See you around!" She gave him a smile, and walked to the door with her blonde curls swaying up and down. One last time, she turned around and looked deep into his eyes—then she was gone. Pete was completely confused.

"Why does this never happen to me?" sighed Jupiter in frustration as he came up behind Pete.

"What?" Pete was brought back to reality.

"Oh, nothing. Well, let's get on with the investigation."

Jupiter and Pete approached the counter, where a slim woman stood.

"Hello! Well, what would you like?" she asked. 'Brianna' was written in embroidered letters on her smock. With her numerous worry lines, she looked older than she probably was. Pete estimated her to be in her mid-forties. The professional smile on her thin lips looked tortured and did not reach her eyes—no comparison to Hedy's uncomplicated warmth. The woman had tied her dark, straw-like hair into an unruly-looking plait.

While Pete's thoughts kept briefly wandering back to the pretty girl, Jupiter had already pushed himself in front of him.

"Just some information, ma'am."

"This is a bakery, young man," the lady replied tonelessly.

Unperturbed, Jupiter asked: "We are on the lookout for the people who sprayed the graffiti on the wall of your shop." Then her expression darkened. The First Investigator had the feeling that a shutter was rattling down between them.

"Do you know who could have done that?" Pete now intervened.

"Oh no," the baker replied quietly but firmly. She looked momentarily unsettled... or frightened. Then she shook her head vehemently. "And I don't even want to know!"

Jupiter continued probing: "On two other buildings in Rocky Beach we found similar graffiti—"

"So what?" She interrupted Jupiter, which he didn't like at all. Her voice trembled a little. "I told you, I have no idea... and I don't want to have anything to do with these... these things!"

"We just—" Jupiter began.

"I have work to do now!" The sentence left no more questions. It was more than clear that the baker did not want to talk to them any more. "If you don't want to buy anything, then I can't help you."

"Yes, yes, all right." Pete tugged at Jupiter's sleeve, who was obviously about to make an extensive retort. "Come on, let's go. Goodbye!"

When they were outside, Pete said: "First that cranky old Mr Quinn, and now this baker! What's got into all these people?"

"Scared?" the First Investigator mused. "You can see that the lady was disturbed and scared."

"You think so?" Pete wondered.

"Well, Mr Quinn was displeased because he wanted to show off and possibly sensed a story that could make him money—but we were in his way." Jupiter looked thoughtfully through the small shop window. The baker had retreated to the back of the shop and was tampering with a large coffee grinder. "Brianna here, on the other hand, is obviously uncomfortable... perhaps even threatened."

“You... you think she knows what’s behind the characters?”

Jupiter nodded. “Yes, I think so. And it doesn’t seem to bode well.”

7. Medieval Knights

Bob stood in front of Miss Bennett with the two books that had given him information about the origin of the puzzling characters and the story that went with them.

“Can I use the photocopier?”

“Yeah, sure! Come on.”

Miss Bennett went ahead into a small side room where the photocopier was. It was a monstrosity—at least ten years old, as big as a filing cabinet and just as cumbersome. She switched it on, and as the machine warmed up, she looked questioningly at Bob. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Hmm...” Bob flipped open the relevant pages. “The characters are from the secret script of the Knights Templar!”

Miss Bennett looked at him in surprise. “Knights Templar? Wasn’t that that medieval monastic order?”

“Yes, right.” Bob briefly skimmed the text again, then placed the book upside down on the glass surface and closed the lid of the copier. Then he pressed start. “The Order was founded in 1118 by a French knight named Hugues de Payens. The official name of the Order is ‘Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon’.”

“Noble knights, how romantic.” Miss Bennett grinned.

“Well, if historians are to be believed, the original nine conspiring knights were not so romantic after all.”

“No?”

“No. They are supposed to offer protection to pilgrims, but there are many rumours surrounding the Order.”

“Hmm... yes... I remember darkly. Weren’t they looking for this golden chest made of acacia wood?”

“Exactly, the chest was the Ark of the Covenant! It was supposed to contain the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments Moses brought back from Mount Sinai.” Bob copied the next page.

Miss Bennett looked at him thoughtfully. “And didn’t these knights also have the legendary Holy Grail in their possession?”

“Some historians are convinced of that, yes.” Almost automatically, Bob took the book out of the photocopier and turned the page. “There are many theories, legends and folklore saying that the Knights Templar amassed a great treasure said to contain the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant, but both have not been found to this day!”

“So you don’t know what happened to the Holy Grail?”

“No, not really. After the Order was disbanded in 1312, some knights went into hiding in Scotland. Later in 1398, it is rumoured that the Holy Grail was taken to Oak Island off the east coast of North America by a man called Henry Sinclair.”

“Fantastic,” marvelled Miss Bennett. “A secret society that still keeps scholars busy after 700 years.”

Suddenly, the mobile phone in Bob’s pocket vibrated. He froze. His mobile phone rang in the library! As inconspicuously as possible and without Miss Bennett noticing, he pressed

the right button through the denim to reject the call away. Bob breathed a sigh of relief. He was terribly embarrassed that he had forgotten to switch off the mobile phone. He would not take a phone call here in the library, not even from his colleagues.

Then Bob continued: "Yes... the Templars have an interesting history. Even today there are followers of the Order all over the world!"

"And what have you got to do with it?" Miss Bennett asked.

"Old Mr Bush of Bush TV hired us to find out who painted graffiti at his shop house." Bob looked at her thoughtfully. "By all accounts, I now know that they are Templar cipher characters!"

"Old Mr Bush, a nice guy..." Wistfulness resonated briefly in Miss Bennett's voice. "His son Ian went to the same school as me—in the same year as well. Strange he didn't take over his father's business."

"Maybe he didn't feel like selling TVs?" Bob had copied the last page and closed the book.

"Well, old Bush didn't just handle TVs. Once he even brought this photocopier back to life!" She laughed. "And Ian, well, he used to be interested in cameras and photography—at least until the devastating fire at school... After that, he wasn't the same."

"Why is that?" Bob wanted to know as he took the copied pages from the output tray and briefly checked that they were complete.

"Well, his best friend Jasper died in the fire."

"Oh. How awful."

"I still get goose bumps when I think about it... and yet the whole thing happened..." Miss Bennett thought for a moment, "... some twenty-seven years ago."

"Sad story." It's funny, Bob thought—for Miss Bennett, events long past were still very present, and here he was, copying written testimonies from 700 years ago.

"Yes. That was it at the time. We were all in shock... Well, it was a long time ago..." Miss Bennett said. "Are you done?" She pointed to the stack of papers in his hand.

Bob nodded. "Yes, I'll quickly put the books away and then I have to go."

"Jupiter and Pete are probably waiting for your report, right?"

He grinned. "Probably Jupe is already drumming nervously on the table as usual."

"Well, don't keep him waiting any longer. We'll clear away the books for you."

"Thank you, that's very nice."

"All except this book," Miss Bennett pointed at the tattered old book in Bob's hands.

Bob weighed the book in his hand and grinned sheepishly. After a quick reach into his trouser pocket, he took out some coins and handed Miss Bennett fifty cents.

Pondering, Jupiter pocketed his mobile phone. "Bob did not answer our call!"

"Does that mean he doesn't like us anymore?" quipped Pete, unlocking the MG.

"I would rather conclude that he is still in the library and is the bogeyman of the entire reading room right now..."

"Well, what are we going to do now that Bob can't give us a progress report?" Pete said as he drove off.

"We need to find out what the other two characters looked like," Jupe said, "otherwise we may be missing an important part of the mystery."

"And how are you going to do that? With a Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup?"

"That would be a possibility," Jupiter thoughtfully pinched his lower lip.

The Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup was a further development of their original Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup which employed telephone calls. In the e-mail version, The Three Investigators would send an e-mail to some of their friends requesting certain information. In this case, they would be attaching image files of the graffiti, asking them for information, otherwise, the recipient was requested to forward the message to as many friends as possible. Within a very short time, the request could reach many people, and it usually would not take long for one or even several of them to get back to The Three Investigators.

“But in this particular case...” Jupiter wondered and suddenly exclaimed: “That’s it! I’ve got it, of course! Why didn’t I think of that in the first place?”

“Uh... would you please share your brainwave with me?” Pete said as he turned into the street that led to the salvage yard.

“Blogs! We’ll just search the well-known community blogs of Rocky Beach! There are enough people now who post their daily experiences on the Internet.”

“And think that their guinea pig’s tummy ache could interest the whole world,” Pete quipped.

“Let them have their wishful thinking... but lots of people walk past the bakery in the morning and I’m sure some of them have noticed the unusual graffiti!” Jupiter tapped his knee impatiently. “I wouldn’t be surprised if someone had already written something about it...”

“It’s no use, we need a photo!”

“All right, I’ll be more precise—I wouldn’t be surprised if someone had already written something about it and posted a photo of the graffiti they took with their mobile phone!”

“That sounds a lot better.”

“Isn’t it?” The First Investigator rubbed his hands together. “Actually, I can’t stand those self-appointed reporters who snap away without any respect for other people’s privacy and then sell their photos to the newspapers... but for once, I would know how to contain my indignation...”

“Oh, another rather rare statement from our First Investigator...”

8. A Great Offer

Twenty minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard. Several days ago, a construction company had started road repair works right in front of the entrance to the yard. Part of the road surface had already been torn up. At this moment, there were thick clouds of dust as Pete carefully steered his MG past a bulldozer to enter the yard.

Only two customers strolled leisurely across the large square, looking for bargains. At the salvage yard, which was known far beyond the borders of Rocky Beach, a veritable treasure trove opened up—nostalgic cameras, metal advertising signs, old tyres, cupboards, fire escapes, strange mirrors, mysterious suitcases or curious paintings. Even three discarded street lamps and the completely dented bonnet of a Jeep lay at the edge of the main path. There was simply everything.

For once, Jupiter's uncle was sitting quietly on an old folding chair at the verandah of the yard office, gazing up at the sky, lost in thought, and playing with his enormous black moustache. As so often, he had his pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth and smoked away. Titus waved to them as Pete's MG slowly rolled through the gate and came to a stop near the yard office.

"Jupe!" Uncle Titus called out to him. "Come over there for a while!"

They got out and the Second Investigator was already striding away, but Jupiter cleared his throat audibly and pointed to the boot.

Pete slapped his forehead. "Oh yes! I had forgotten all about the flux capacitor..."

Jupiter rolled his eyes. "Novalux projector! Novalux T-800, to be exact!"

"I'm really curious to see if it still works," Pete heaved the box with the projector out of the car. "Anyway, you'd better tell me exactly and very quickly where this thing should go to..."

"Just take it to Headquarters," Jupiter said. "Tomorrow I'll take a closer look at it. Meanwhile, I'll go and see what Uncle Titus wants."

Headquarters was actually an old mobile home trailer that they had received as a gift from Uncle Titus a long time ago. The Three Investigators had hidden it under a pile of scrap metal and other junk. Since then, the trailer could only be entered via secret passages.

Jupiter went up to Uncle Titus. "Yes, Uncle?"

"There was a man here this morning looking for you," Uncle Titus said. "Anyway, he left his contact number and asked you to call him back." Then Uncle Titus reached into this pocket and pulled out a card.

Jupiter took the card and saw that it had a name—"Sebastian Dawson"—and a mobile phone number.

"Did he say what he wanted?" Jupiter asked.

"I didn't really catch what he was saying due to the horrendous noise coming from the road works," Uncle Titus replied, "but I think he said something like a 'protractor'."

"Okay," Jupiter said. "I'll call him back."

Jupiter quickly ran to the Cold Gate, a secret entrance to Headquarters. It was an old and huge refrigerator which was leaning against a pile of junk as if by chance. He looked around to make sure that nobody was looking, opened the door and crept in. There, he activated a

secret mechanism which allowed the back wall of the fridge to be pushed aside, revealing a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main entrance of the trailer. Jupiter opened the trailer door and entered.

In addition to a few worn out armchairs and a table, Headquarters was equipped with everything they needed for their investigation work—telephone, fax, a computer with printer and Internet connection, and even a small crime lab, where they analyzed traces and fingerprints. Nearly every available space of the trailer was used to make room for shelves and cupboards to store diverse investigation equipment and dozens of files containing reports of their earlier cases.

Pete was already there sitting on an old armchair with a can of Coke in his hand. The box with the projector was on the table, and a large floor fan was running at full power.

“It’s another oven in here,” grumbled Pete. “Such high temperatures should be banned!”

Jupiter also got a can of Coke from the fridge and dropped onto his chair.

“You can transfer the photos from the camera to the hard drive.” Pete handed the digital camera to Jupiter.

“Yes, I’ll also print them out too,” Jupiter said, “right after I call this Sebastian Dawson.”

“Sebastian Dawson?” Pete wondered. “Who is he?”

“Someone who came here earlier looking for me,” Jupe said. “He left his name and number with Uncle Titus. Anyway, here goes...” He switched on the loudspeaker so that Pete could hear the conversation and dialled Mr Dawson’s number.

“Hello?” Jupe said. “Is that Mr Dawson?”

“Yes, speaking,” the man replied.

“I’m Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators,” Jupe continued. “I understand that this morning you came to the salvage yard to look for me...”

“Ah, yes,” Mr Dawson replied. “Yes, it’s about the projector you bought from Mrs Sullivan this morning.”

“What about it?” Jupe wondered as he looked at the box containing the said projector right in front of him on the table.

“Oh, I went to Mrs Sullivan in response to her ad in the newspaper, but unfortunately I was too late,” Mr Dawson said. “She told me that she had already sold it to you and she was kind enough to give me your address.”

“Oh, yes,” Jupiter confirmed.

“Well, I would like to buy the projector from you,” Mr Dawson went on.

“Well, Mr Dawson, I’m very sorry, but that projector is not for sale,” Jupiter replied.

“I’m a collector and the Novalux is what I want. Could a fifty dollar uh... offer possibly change your mind?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that item is not for sale,” Jupe repeated.

“Naturally, I uh... understand... say, what about a hundred dollars?” Mr Dawson was persistent.

“Mr Dawson, we really appreciate your generous offer, but we haven’t even checked if the projector still works at all,” Jupiter said.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Mr Dawson replied quickly.

Jupiter could not say exactly why, but he disliked the frantic persistence of the man. He felt himself under pressure. “No, no, you don’t seem to understand me. We want to—”

“Two hundred dollars!” Mr Dawson interrupted him.

“Sir, I just told you—” Jupe began.

“Hey, nothing in the world is unsellable,” Mr Dawson interrupted him. “I’ll tell you what, I really want that projector. When you decide to sell it, call me. Just don’t sell it to

others. My current offer is two hundred dollars.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know if I intend to sell it,” Jupiter said and he hung up.

“Two hundred dollars?” Pete hissed. He stared at Jupiter imploringly. It was obvious what the Second Investigator thought of the offer—he was determined to accept it. “And you only paid five dollars for it! Why didn’t you sell it to him? That old projector probably doesn’t even work anymore.”

“I don’t know.” Jupiter frowned. “I had a hunch that something was rotten about it.” On the other hand, The Three Investigators could use the money well. As usual, their common fund was almost empty.

The First Investigator struggled to put his concerns aside, but he succeeded. He didn’t have to smell a dark secret in everything and everyone. Perhaps Mr Dawson was really nothing more than an eccentric, wealthy collector.

“How about we get on with our case now,” he finally said.

“Not for me, Juve,” Pete argued. “It is way too hot in here... besides Bob is not back and I think we should wait for him for his report on his research.”

“Okay, we should do just that,” Jupiter agreed. “I’ll send an SMS to Bob to ask him to come here tomorrow morning at 9 am, and then we will continue with our discussion.”

“Fine,” Pete said. “I guess I’ll better go home and take a cold bath right now. See you tomorrow!” With that, Pete left Headquarters.

Meanwhile, Jupiter, as expected, opened an Internet browser and hammered away at the keyboard.

Seconds later, several pages opened and the First Investigator clicked through the seemingly endless diary-like entries on numerous private blogs from Rocky Beach, with which young people and adults alike shared their virtual and real lives with readers. Jupiter went through blogs about all sorts of things including the weather, little creations of model railways, strange dinosaur sculptures in the shopping centres, and even one about the beautiful pink orchids in a neighbour’s garden.

An hour later, he had found nothing, and the heat was unbearable in the trailer. Very soon, he, too, left Headquarters.

9. The Red Cross

The next morning, Jupiter and Pete were already at Headquarters before 9 am. Jupiter continued his search on the blogs.

Pete switched on the radio and the weather report came on: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. In Southern California, excessive heat warning remains in effect for today. Afternoon highs will range from 34 degrees Celsius at the coast, 36 near the bay, and 38 in the inland areas. However for tomorrow, thunderstorms, rain and damaging winds with peak gusts up to 120 km/h are forecast to hit most of Southern California from early morning till mid-afternoon. This will be followed by a breezy and cooler pattern on Saturday which will continue into the middle of next week."

Then the door opened and Bob entered the trailer. "Fellas, there you are. I have great news!"

"Ah, our expert for research!" Pete teased.

Jupiter interrupted his search and quickly sent the graffiti photos for printing. While the printer began to rattle, he listened to Bob, who began to tell his friends in great detail about the successful research in the library yesterday.

"The Knights Templar?" Jupiter finally asked incredulously after a while.

"A cipher?" Pete marvelled. "Why did those knights need a cipher for anyway?"

"Quite simple. Over the years, the mysterious Order had developed into a squad of hardened and dedicated soldiers," Bob replied. "They managed the royal treasuries and even wielded tremendous power in /politics. That's why they designed their own script for their secret documents, which of course only they could read."

"Unbelievable," Pete remarked. "And how many Knights Templar were there?"

"No one can say for sure. More and more followers joined the secret society and soon they were spread all over the world. Even though they were fully disbanded, there are some people who believe the Order went underground and remains in existence in some form to this day."

"Hmm... did they wear special clothes?" Jupiter wanted to know, and his fingers were itching to search the Internet for illustrations. Maybe he would be quicker than Bob, but their research colleague had rummaged through countless volumes in the library and done preliminary work that could not usually be replaced by any mouse clicks, no matter how quick. "Did they have a special symbol or seal? Maybe a coat of arms?"

Bob nodded and leafed through his stack of copies. Then he pulled out a sheet and held it out to his friends. With his index finger, he pointed to a black and white drawing depicting a knight wearing a helmet and a white surcoat emblazoned with a large cross. He was holding a sword and a shield on which was also a cross.

"The Templar Cross is red in colour and is the symbol of martyrdom," Bob said.

Pete was startled and choked on his Coke. Coughing, he looked at the drawing in horror. "That's Mr Quinn's alien!"

"An... alien? What alien?" Bob looked first at Pete, then at Jupiter, then he started laughing.

Pete looked back sceptically. "Mr Quinn claimed it was an alien."

“Of course you didn’t buy that, did you, Pete?” Bob said.

“Well...” Pete hesitated with an answer. “Well... no... of course not.”

“Who is this Mr Quinn?” Bob asked.

“At the house on Old Malibu Road we met a Mr Quinn, the owner of the house.” The First Investigator grinned disparagingly. “He was a, shall we say, headstrong elderly gentleman who chased us away from the place.”

“He chased you away?” Bob asked.

Pete waved it off. “The smarter ones gave in, because we also had to deal with Dick Perry...”

In a few words, Bob learned how his two friends had fought with Mr Quinn, Dick Perry and then got information from Mr Raynes. They also told him about their failure at Jackson’s Bakery.

“You don’t seriously think there’s a Knight Templar running around here, do you?” Bob looked at his colleagues in confusion. “Or was it an alien after all?”

“Whatever it is, the characters are not extraterrestrial, but extraordinary,” Jupiter said.

“That’s true. There’s nothing wrong with that, really,” Bob said. “Let Dick Perry chase an alien until the end of time, as long as he stays out of our way.”

Suddenly, Bob’s gaze fell on the calendar above the table. He stared at it as if spellbound, which his two friends also noticed.

“What’s wrong?” Jupe asked.

“I just noticed something else entirely!”

“What?” Pete asked.

“The calendar, Pete! Today is Thursday the 12th!”

The Second Investigator sat bolt upright and looked at Bob with feigned bewilderment. “Razor-sharp observation, Bob!”

“Yeah... well no... I mean... tomorrow is Friday—Friday the 13th!”

“What are you getting at?” Jupiter suspected that Bob must have discovered some important detail.

“At the order of King Philip IV of France, many of the Templars were arrested,” Bob said. He looked at his friends. “And that was about 700 years ago—on a Friday the 13th!”

For a moment, they were silent. Finally, Jupiter said: “Is that the origin of the belief that sinister things happen on Friday the 13th?”

Bob nodded. “It’s one of several theories. Some historians say it’s the most plausible.”

“So you think that someone is specifically targeting tomorrow with these... these Templar characters because it’s Friday the 13th?” Pete didn’t quite know what to make of this creepy circumstance yet.

“Hmm...” Bob thought. “It could also be coincidence. I have no idea.”

Pete slumped back in the armchair and looked up at the ceiling. “Well, wonderful. Tomorrow is Friday the 13th, there’s a ghost of a knight running around Rocky Beach and—”

“—Painting graffiti on houses with a 700-year-old spray can?” Jupiter had to smile.

“Perhaps the spirit moves with the times?” Pete wondered.

“Nonsense, Pete,” Jupe said. “I’m sure there’s something else behind the whole story... and that’s why I’m going to continue sifting through the blog entries for now.” Jupiter turned to the monitor and concentrated on the Internet pages again.

“Blog entries?” asked Bob. Pete explained in brief that a cleaning company had already destroyed valuable traces in front of the bakery and that they hoped to be able to look to social media for help.

“Good idea,” praised Bob. “There are more in some blogs now than in the daily newspapers.” It was an observation that had already brought Bob some lively discussions with his father, who worked at the *Los Angeles Times*.

“Nothing.” Jupiter suddenly said.

“What do you mean nothing?” asked Pete in surprise.

“Nothing. No blog post, no community chats, no virtual twittering about the graffiti. Nothing.” Disappointed, Jupiter slumped back onto his chair.

“Wait for this, fellas, I haven’t even told you the best bit yet,” Bob went on, “something perhaps more important...”

“So saving the best for the last huh?” Pete remarked. “Come on, Bob, spit it out!”

“At the library, I not only found about the Knights Templar, but also the conversion of their cipher,” Bob said. “That means that I can decode the characters of the graffiti now.”

“Really?” Pete beamed.

“Yes,” Bob said. “The cipher is a substitution code that uses 25 characters to represent the letters of our alphabet except for the letter ‘J’.”

“I can understand that,” Jupe added. “The letter ‘J’ did not exist when encryption was invented. It was a graphic variant of the letter ‘I’, and the ‘J’ only appeared later around the 16th century.”

“The characters are basically angles, triangles, and kites, with at most one dot per character,” Bob continued, “but most important for us now is that the characters on Mr Bush’s shop house are the alphabets ‘B-A-C-K’.”

“Back?” Jupiter looked at him in amazement. Then he repeated the word again thoughtfully. “Back... hmm...”

“Come on, Pete,” Bob urged. “Show me the graffiti you’ve photographed.”

“All right.” Pete took the printed photos out of the printer and looked at each one. “Be careful, the ink is not completely dry yet,” he warned. “It always takes a little longer with the new ink...”

“Anyway, here are the first four at Mr Bush’s, then another four at Mr Quinn’s, and five at the bakery in which only three are visible as the other two have been erased... Together there are exactly... uh-oh... thirteen characters!”

10. Thirteen Characters

Bob took the photos and with the help of the code conversion chart in the old cryptography book that was now part of The Three Investigators' library, he and Pete began to decipher the characters.

"This first character at the bakery is an 'I'," Bob said.

"Or a 'J'!" Pete interjected, who had sat down right next to Bob.

"And... the second and third characters from the bakery are 'H' and 'A'," Bob said after a careful comparison between the characters and the code chart.

With pointed fingers, Jupiter held the photo of taken at Mr Quinn's house and blew on the shiny ink for a few more seconds before placing it on the table between the other two and Bob began to unravel those characters as well.

"This inverted 'V' is a 'C'," he muttered. It didn't take long for them to determine the remaining three letters.

"So now, from left to right we have 'B-A-C-K' at Mr Bush's shop house..."

"I' or 'J', 'H', and 'A' at the bakery..." Pete added.

"And from Mr Quinn, 'C-O-M-E'," Jupiter rounded it up.

"'B-A-C-K'; 'I or J-H-A'; 'C-O-M-E'," Bob said.

"'BACK' and 'COME' are clear. But what is 'I or J' and 'H-A'?" Pete wondered.

"Reverse it—'COME BACK'" Jupiter said. "Just think logically... and don't let badly drying ink dictate the basis of your conclusions. Besides, we mustn't forget that there were two other characters after the 'A'!"

"Wait a minute!" Bob exclaimed. "What about the order? Do you know which one of these were painted first?"

"Not a bad thought!" Juve said. "If I recall, Mr Raynes said that the bakery was sprayed first followed by Mr Quinn's house. He did not say anything about Mr Bush's shop house."

"Okay, if the perpetrator was systematic, let's put 'I or J-H-A' first, followed by 'COME BACK'," Bob said and stared for a few seconds before exclaiming: "Got it! 'I HAVE COME BACK'! The missing letters are 'V' and 'E'!"

"Well done, Bob!" Jupiter praised. "That makes a lot of sense... Oh wait, I just remembered something. When I asked the graffiti cleaner about the two erased characters, he told me that they were two triangles. What are the characters for 'V' and 'E'?"

Bob looked at the code conversion chart, reached for his felt-tip pen and scribbled away on the bakery photo.



"So it is... two triangles!" he beamed. "The triangle for 'V' has a dot inside."

"Great work! We are now sure of the message," Juve remarked. "'I have come back'."

"Now we would only have to know who would announce his return in this way," Bob murmured, studying the photos in the hope of coming up with a bright idea.

“Actually, I’m not that interested,” muttered the Second Investigator.

Jupiter grinned cautiously. “Well, perhaps some medieval knight?”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear,” said Pete. “What makes you think of that?”

“Well, who else would use their cipher?” Jupe asked.

“Actually, it doesn’t matter for now,” Bob interjected. “This sentence here... is a clear threat!”

“Which is directed against whom?” Pete wondered.

“Well, against Mr Bush, Mr Quinn and the bakery, Pete!” Bob said.

Pete exhaled. Every answer led to a new question. “And what, pray tell, do those three —”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed unmistakably across the salvage yard. “Pete! Bob! Come out now!”

Jupe groaned. “Not now! That’s gotta be work for us.”

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “You got to be joking—in this weather?”

“Wait,” Jupe said. “I’ll go out and see what she wants.” With that, he alone went out the trailer and to the Cold Gate. As he stepped out into the salvage yard, he felt the extreme heat. Aunt Mathilda was standing a short distance away.

Back in the trailer, Pete suggested: “How about we get out through Green Gate One now and run away? This is not the time for work!” Bob ignored him and continued to look at the graffiti photos.

A short while later, Jupe returned. “Bad news, fellas!” he said. “Aunt Mathilda wants us to help Uncle Titus to make the salvage yard as storm-proof as possible for tomorrow’s severe thunderstorm.”

“No!” Pete exclaimed. “Not in this weather!”

“I guess we have no choice but to put our investigation on hold,” Jupe decided. “I suggest we get the work done as fast as possible so that we can continue.”

Dejected, the three of them ventured out of Headquarters. However, Jupiter’s plan to do the work fast did not materialize. They could not continue working in long stretches. In fact, they had to take regular breaks to get out of the heat as well as to keep themselves fully hydrated. Eventually, they took turns to go out.

The Three Investigators slaved in the sun, carrying cartons and boxes into the storeroom. Then they had to secure the canopy, under which were kept the more valuable things. They stopped for lunch, and then continued working.

Finally, they finished the work and were sitting at the verandah of the salvage yard office fully exhausted while being pampered by Aunt Mathilda with cherry pie and orange juice. By then, it was late evening and the heat had subsided.

After dinner, Jupiter decided to go back to Headquarters to discuss what to do next. When Jupiter opened the trailer door and stepped in, he saw the red light on the answering machine flashing. The machine showed one recorded message, and Jupiter pressed the play button.

It was a man who left the message. “Hello?” it sounded timidly. “This is Ian Bush, Walter Bush’s son. Can you call me back?” He left his phone number.

“This could be interesting!” Jupiter remarked. “Perhaps Ian Bush could give us more clues.”

He reached for the phone and dialled the number.

“Turn on the loudspeaker,” Bob whispered softly.

Pete, who was sitting closer to the small loudspeaker, pressed a button. Now he and Bob could listen to the conversation.

A man answered the call. Jupiter recognized the voice from the recording on the answering machine.

"Hello, Mr Ian Bush? This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators. You left a message for me to call you back."

"Uh... yes," Hesitantly, the son of their client said in a shaky voice: "Well, my father told me that you were investigating these... strange graffiti characters."

"That's right."

"I'm asking you to let the case rest." Ian Bush took an audible breath. "Forget about it."

"Excuse me? What happened? Why should we—"

"Just forget about it, okay?" Ian Bush did not wait for an answer. "The... the police will... find the vandals soon, I'm sure. Goodbye."

"But wait! ... Well, well, he hung up."

"Hmm..." Bob glanced at Jupiter. "Very strange."

Jupiter put the handset back on the phone. "Something is very wrong. First the lovely baker gives us a clear rebuff and now Bush Jr wants us to drop the case!"

"Not to mention Mr Quinn!" Pete added.

The First Investigator pinched so hard on his lower lip that Pete and Bob became worried.

"I wonder if they all realize the significance of the characters?" Bob finally said.

"Hard to imagine, actually. What would connect the two older gentlemen with the considerably younger baker?" Pete looked at his friends questioningly.

"How old do you think the baker is?" Jupe asked.

"Well, she must have been in her early forties," Pete said. "Still, somehow the three of them don't fit together."

"Perhaps if you put Ian Bush into the picture instead of his father, it would lower the average age considerably." Jupiter played with a pencil.

"If the three of them really do have something like a common history," Bob said, "then that would certainly lead us to a possible motive... and possibly the perpetrator."

"It'll be nice if we found the perpetrator before midnight!" said Pete. "We don't know what our Knight Templar is up to on Friday the 13th."

"I wonder what you always think of that date?" Bob objected.

"May I remind you that it was you who brought that up first!" Pete interjected. "Anyway, if that guy is really a knight, I expect him to have a sword and a shield, wear armour and things like that! Goodness, how could we handle him?"

"Calm down, it won't be that bad," Bob grinned. "We'd better try to find out what connects the three graffiti victims." He reached for the phone.

"Who are you calling?" Pete asked.

"The lady who got goosebumps when I told her about our case."

11. Who's the Next Target?

Bob dialled the number of the library but nobody answered. However, he did not expect anyone to actually pick up the phone. It was already after seven and Miss Bennett was surely on her way home. He looked up her home number and dialled again. This time they heard the busy signal—also on the second and third try.

“Then I guess we’ll have to visit her unannounced,” he said and hung up.

“Shouldn’t we wait until the line is free?”

“You said you wanted this case solved before midnight, Pete.” Bob smiled at his colleague. “Miss Bennett has known us long enough. If we ring her bell at,” he glanced at his watch, “half past eight, she knows that it’s important to us, and she won’t be angry.”

“Let’s go then.” Jupiter opened the door of the trailer and shortly afterwards, they roared to Miss Bennett’s house in the MG. It was still very warm, but the small spring clouds that had formed over the Pacific in the meantime testified to the expected change in the weather.

Miss Bennett did not live too far from the salvage yard, so they were already at her house a few minutes later. Her red Golf was parked on the street—another sign that she was home.

They walked through the narrow garden gate, past spreading hibiscus bushes to the front door and rang the bell.

Astonished, the librarian opened the door. “Jupiter, Pete and Bob? Has something happened? Oh, wait...” She held the cordless phone to her ear again. “Julia, I’ll call you back later, okay?” She ended the call and invited The Three Investigators in.

Miss Bennett led them into the living room. Her house looked cheerful and chaotic at the same time. Colourful pictures hung everywhere. Countless books stood on high shelves. Francine, her Siamese cat, lay on her blanket and snored softly. The visitors did not seem to interest her.

Miss Bennett disappeared into the kitchen to fetch drinks while the three boys stepped out onto the small but cosy patio. It was on the sunny side, which is why Miss Bennett had put up a large parasol.

“So, what brings you to me?” Miss Bennett placed three glasses of cold mineral water on the table. Then she sat down with The Three Investigators at the old oak table and looked at them intently.

“Well,” Bob began. “You’ve lived in Rocky Beach for a long time, haven’t you, and you said you went to school with Ian Bush?”

“Oh gosh, that really was quite a while ago!” remarked Miss Bennett in amazement.

“We still hope that you can help us in some way.”

“Is this about your Knights Templar again?”

“Not again... still.” Bob put the glass down. “These strange characters have now appeared on the walls of three houses.”

“I read about it in the paper earlier, yes.”

“In addition to Mr Bush, the Jackson’s Bakery is also among the targeted...”

“As well as a wayward older gentleman, Mr Quinn in Old Malibu Road,” Pete added.

“But we’re still missing the context.”

They could see from Miss Bennett's face that she had so far been unable to do anything with the information presented.

"We suspect that none of this is a coincidence," Jupiter informed her. "That there must be a connection between the three of them!"

Miss Bennett sat back and thought for a moment. "Well, the name Quinn doesn't ring a bell. But Brianna Jackson, the baker's daughter, was in the same year as Ian and me."

"I see. That was probably the woman in the bakery!" Pete snapped.

"Yes," Jupe added. "The baker had the name 'Brianna' embroidered on her smock."

"She learned the craft from her father," Miss Bennett said.

"Then we're on the right track, Miss Bennett!" Jupiter said. "Does Mr Quinn perhaps have children too?"

"As I said, I don't know a Mr Quinn," Miss Bennett replied, shaking her head. "Where is his house?"

"24 Old Malibu Road."

"No, Pete. That doesn't mean anything to me." She thought hard. "Or... yes, yes... wait a minute. Yeah, right! Jimmy lives there somewhere! Jimmy Sinclair. We took some classes together. I don't know his exact address, though."

"Sinclair?" Bob bristled. "Hmm..."

"What's so surprising about that?" Miss Bennett wondered.

"Do you remember? A certain Henry Sinclair supposedly brought the Holy Grail to the east coast in 1398!"

"Do you think Jimmy Sinclair had anything to do with this?" asked Pete.

Bob shrugged his shoulders in perplexity. "No," he said. "I can't imagine that after all."

"In any case, it's all very strange," Jupiter said.

"Do you think someone is targeting our cohort?" Miss Bennett asked.

"The fact that the three of them went to school together doesn't prove anything." The First Investigator watched Francine thoughtfully as she turned over on her blanket.

"Let's see where exactly this Jimmy lives first." Bob stood up. "Do you have a phone book?"

"Of course, Bob. Inside in the drawer below the telephone."

"I'll be right back!" Bob hurried into the living room.

Meanwhile, Miss Bennett was thinking feverishly and suddenly looked at Pete and Jupiter, startled. At that moment, however, Bob came back. He was leafing through the telephone book.

"Simmons... Simpson... Sinclair." He tapped his index finger on the page. "Bingo, fellas. 24 Old Malibu Road!"

"If Jimmy Sinclair stays there, then who is Mr Quinn?" Pete wondered.

"They might be related," Bob surmised. "Father-in-law or uncle? Anyway, it is clear now that the graffiti was meant for Mr Sinclair."

"Bob, I also told you about the fire at school..." Miss Bennett said.

"In which a boy was killed?"

"Yeah, right. All three of them—Jimmy Sinclair, Brianna Jackson and Ian Bush—belonged to a clique that often hung out together."

"A clique? Were there others in it?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"Yes, two... no, three." Completely absorbed in thought, she continued to speak: "Charlie Parker... um... Chloe Smathers—who, by the way, was involved with Ian Bush at the time—well, and Jasper, the one who died."

"What? The boy who died in the fire?"

“Right, Bob... and Chloe was killed... wait... hmm, pretty much nine years later in a terrible car accident.” Miss Bennett swallowed. “A driver came towards her the wrong-way on the coast road at night and rammed her car head-on. She didn’t stand a chance.”

Pete pulled the corners of his mouth down. “That’s horrendous... every driver’s nightmare.”

Bob leaned forward with a worried expression. “Nine years? Are you sure?”

“Yes, why?”

“The number nine played a significant role in the Knights Templar. For example, initially there were nine founding members. And it took nine years for the Order to receive the formal endorsement of the Church.” Bob glanced around the room. These mysterious connections were unsettling him more by the minute.

They were silent. Only Francine’s soft snoring came through the open patio door.

“Friday the 13th is not until tomorrow,” Bob said. “The Knight Templar has one night left.”

The hairs on the back of Pete’s neck stood up. He didn’t like the way his friend said it at all, but Jupiter continued unperturbed while reaching for the phone book. “It fits in perfectly that there is only one former clique member whose house wall is still untouched.”

“Charlie Parker!” nodded Bob.

“Why...” Pete stammered, “are you leafing through the phone book now?”

The First Investigator grinned. “So we can lie in wait later.”

“Oh? And where?”

“Well, in front of his house, Pete. If someone really has it in for the students of yesteryear, he’ll turn up there tonight. Charlie Parker is the next and last target of the Knights Templar!”

12. The Mission Fails

The Three Investigators had been speculating for a while without coming up with any new information. At least they had managed to narrow down the month in which the accident at Rocky Beach High School had happened, based on Miss Bennett's memories.

After Jupiter, Pete and Bob had said goodbye, they had all first gone home to put on dark clothes. Shortly before eleven, they met again at Headquarters. Pete and Bob had told their parents that they would spend the night at Jupiter's house and had thus avoided unpleasant questions.

In the meantime, Jupiter had packed some equipment into their backpacks. Together they drove to Charlie Parker's house, an imposing villa set back a little on the outskirts of town.

Well-tended shrubs and lemon trees protected the property from uninvited glances, but also shrouded it in darkness. They didn't need torches, though, because the faint light of the crescent moon fell through the numerous cracks in the cloud cover, and the glow of a much too bright street lamp filtered through the bushes here and there. They positioned themselves in various places around the house and waited.

Slowly silence fell over Rocky Beach and they only heard the rustling of the wind blowing through the leaves. Every now and then, an owl called out, probably sitting in a tree somewhere nearby, hoping for prey.

Pete crouched behind a small garden shed that stood in a corner at the back of the villa on the edge of the property. From here, he had an excellent view of the verandah and the rear windows.

There was no light anywhere, nothing was moving in the house.

Charlie Parker was apparently not there. Jupiter had known to report that, according to Internet information, he ran a successful real estate agency in Los Angeles. That explained why he could afford such a lavish villa.

The minutes ticked by. The Second Investigator glanced at the shimmering hands of his watch. It was ten to twelve. A long day lay behind them and he had to yawn. Pete firmly resolved not to get tired, and to cheer himself up, he thought of Hedy, the girl he met at the bakery.

The roaring engine of a car starting nearby broke the silence for a brief moment, then the car moved away and silence returned. Pete had hardly noticed the sound as he was so lost in thought. Eventually, he forced himself to push the memory of Hedy aside. He rose and rocked from one foot to the other. Then he stretched and yawned again. Sleepily, he turned from right to left and back again.

His stomach growled. Uneasily, he let his hand slide into his trouser pocket, pulled out the walkie-talkie, and pressed the talk button. "Did anyone bring some chocolate bars or something?"

There was a crackle in the speaker, then Bob's voice rang out. "Huh?"

"Chocolate bars," Pete whispered. "I'm hungry"

"Concentration, please!" admonished Jupiter, who was crouching on the other side of the villa.

“Concentration...” Pete murmured. He had to yawn again before pressing the talk button. “Yes, all right, Jupe. Just hungry.”

Then it was back to silence. Only the owl called out again. At that moment, Pete perceived a shadow, but only very briefly. He was still wondering if his tired eyes had played a trick on him.

Tensely, he looked in the direction where he suspected the shadow to be.

No! It was not an imagination! There was the shadow again. Slowly he moved towards the patio. Fortunately, the clouds had just given way to moonlight again. “Fellas,” he whispered into the intercom. “I think something is happening here.”

“It’s about time,” Bob whispered. “It’s almost midnight.”

“I see a dark figure!” Pete whispered excitedly. “He is looking around, searching for something!”

“Can you tell who it is or what he looks like?” Jupiter asked.

“No... but now...” Pete said, “now the guy is shining his flashlight at the house!”

There was excitement in Jupiter’s voice. “Is he wearing a white coat or something like that?”

Pete stared so spellbound at the shadow that he did not register the question. “Apparently he’s looking for a place to put his graffiti. I’ll bet you anything that’s our mysterious graffiti sprayer!”

“Just don’t lose sight of him,” the Second Investigator mumbled to himself, “and above all, don’t let your guard down.” But the shadow was still far enough away for the intruder to hear him or the walkie-talkie.

“Pete! Does he have anything in his hand? An aerosol can?” Just as Jupiter asked emphatically, Pete saw in the frantically twitching beam of the flashlight that the figure was looking for something in his jacket.

Pete pressed the talk button. “Now he’s reaching into his pocket and getting something out! I’ll get him!”

Immediately, Pete crept out, convinced that the shadow had taken out a can of spray paint and was about to do his work. This could only be the mysterious vandal they had spent the night worrying about! Now they had him... almost... as Pete just had to catch him.

As quietly as he could, he approached the patio from behind the large bushes. Suddenly, Jupiter spoke into the walkie-talkie: “No, wait! Pete!”

But that was too loud. The figure turned around. At the same moment, Pete lunged and threw himself with all his might at the intruder, who was slightly taller than him. Pete had taken full advantage of the moment of surprise. Together they fell to the ground.

“Ha, gotcha! No more graffiti nonsense!”

Gasping, the person under Pete tried to fight back.

“Who are you? I’ll show you!” Pete had trouble with his opponent. The unknown man was tremendously strong. Quick as a flash, the man grabbed the Second Investigator and threw him over his head with a mighty heave.

Pete slammed down on the patio tiles and saw stars flash before his eyes for a brief moment. Then he heard his opponent pick himself up and try to pounce on him with a deft turn.

Quick as a flash, he rolled to the side. The unknown man grabbed at nothing. He staggered and Pete took the chance to get back on his feet.

As soon as he stood up, the attacker was back. He tried to grab Pete by the arm but missed. The Second Investigator had taken a long step backwards, bent forward at the same time, grabbed his opponent by the clothes and then let himself fall backwards. As he did so,

he thrust his right foot into the man's stomach with lightning speed and hurled him over himself.

Completely surprised, the man landed in the grass and almost immediately, Pete pounced on him and wanted to press him to the ground with his hands and knees. But this did not happen. Bright light blinded the two fighters and an energetic voice suddenly echoed across the lawn.

"Stop! Police! Stop!"

Pete could hardly believe it. "Inspector Cotta?"

That was clearly his voice! He would help Pete and then they could take the culprit into custody!

The Second Investigator squinted into the swinging cones of light. They were coming towards him. A few seconds later, a beam of light hit him right in the face.

"Pete Crenshaw?"

Pete held his hand over his eyes. Inspector Cotta noticed and lowered his flashlight.

"You're just in time! I have—" Pete began.

"What do you think you are doing?" the inspector hissed. "And let go of Officer Doyle!"

Officer Doyle? Completely taken aback, Pete looked at Cotta, next to whom another police officer was standing.

"Officer Doyle?" Pete stammered.

"Yes, you fool," gasped the man lying on the grass. "You grabbed the wrong person. Now get off me!"

Pete looked uncertainly back and forth between him, Cotta and his friends. Only now did he notice the uniform his opponent was wearing. Hastily, he rose and helped the policeman to his feet. He stood up, patted his trousers and shook his head wordlessly.

"Sorry," Pete said meekly. "I couldn't have known!"

Now Jupiter and Bob came running up. "Inspector Cotta!" Jupiter was a little out of breath. "What are you doing here?"

"That's what I'd like to ask you!" the inspector exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here in the middle of the night? And on private property!"

"Well..." Jupiter took a deep breath, "we have a reasonable suspicion that this house is the next target of the graffiti sprayer, and..."

"And that's why you're hanging around here? This is the work of the police!"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you think we wouldn't be just as clever as you and have figured the same thing out long ago? What do you think we're doing here?" Cotta ruffled his hair and looked perplexed for a moment. "The perpetrator was probably already in the vicinity and has now left without having achieved anything after we have turned night into day here."

"Arrest those fellows!" suddenly another familiar voice sounded gasped behind them. Out of the darkness came a burly person, slightly out of breath, pointing at the three boys with an outstretched arm.

"Oh no, not him!" groaned Pete.

Cotta rolled his eyes and sighed. "Now what's he doing here?"

"I've been watching those three all day. They're the graffiti vandals!" The portly detective breathed heavily and flailed wildly in front of Cotta's face.

"Mr Perry—" the inspector began.

But Perry could not be stopped in his flow of words: "This afternoon they even admired their graffiti of the previous nights, photographed them and..." Gasping, he had to take a breath. "And now they've been out here scouting the area for the next target!"

Jupiter looked at him in amazement. “What? That’s absolutely ridiculous!”

“Arrest the boys!” Perry demanded again. “Search their pockets for the spray cans!”

“Mr Perry! What’s got into you?” Bob roared.

Perry leaned forward towards Jupiter and hissed softly: “I always knew there was something wrong with you three greenhorns. Now—”

“Now it’s getting too much for me!” Cotta took two steps back and instructed his officer with a hand gesture to keep order here. “Jupiter, Pete, Bob, you go home now. We’ll have a talk tomorrow.” Then he turned to the fat detective and said: “And you, Mr Perry, go away and don’t come back here...”

Dejected, The Three Investigators drove back to the salvage yard, where they retired to Headquarters for a debriefing. The mood was depressing. None of them really knew how to proceed from here.

Pete had botched the mission. They had let themselves be shown up like complete novices. They expected Cotta to give them a telling off and that certainly wouldn’t be much of a help in the near future. But most of all, they were no closer to finding the mysterious Knight Templar.

Pete and Bob sat slumped in the old, worn armchairs and gazed at the First Investigator, who was completely rehashing the entire case and especially the last few hours. The appearance of Dick Perry really annoyed them. What was he up to? Why was he following them? Pete was convinced that he was up to something shady again. After all, this was not the first time that clown had tried to play a double game at their expense.

“Maybe, but we don’t have time for Dick Perry at the moment,” Jupiter decided. “Besides, there is no evidence to suggest that he is actively investigating the graffiti.”

“I don’t need any evidence for that, Juve,” Pete objected.

“He wants to make his mark, and do so by any means,” Bob added.

“That’s right, Bob. He’s probably frantically searching for a lead to satisfy his client—that cranky Mr Quinn.” Jupiter played with a pencil again. “In fact, that narrow-minded sleuth hasn’t the faintest idea where to start with any investigation.”

“But where do we go from here?” Pete wanted to know. “We’ve been back here moping for an hour, it’s almost half past one, and I’m pretty exhausted.”

“Let’s sleep on it for a night,” Bob said and stood up. “In the morning, the world will look very different. Nothing more will happen tonight.”

Jupiter put the pencil aside. “And in the light of day, some things are much clearer.”

“Then I’ll see you here in the morning?” Pete assumed.

“Yes, Pete. Get home safely, fellas.”

Pete and Bob left the trailer and made their way to Red Gate Rover—one of their secret exits in the fence of the salvage yard. Bob activated a hidden mechanism and a few boards swung up to reveal an opening. Then they slipped out into the street and Pete closed the secret exit. The outside of this part of the fence was decorated by local artists many years ago at Uncle Titus’s invitation. Here was the depiction of the great San Francisco fire of 1906.

“Okay, let’s go home,” Pete said and looked up at the sky, which was by now completely covered by clouds. Not a single star could be seen any more. “Looks like the meteorologists could be right with their prediction.”

“I hope so,” Bob yawned. “Anyway, see you in the morning...”

Pete got into his MG, which was parked right in front of Red Gate Rover, and drove off. Bob watched him go off thoughtfully for a moment before walking to the main street where

he had parked his Beetle.

As he turned the corner of the fence, he stopped, rooted to the spot.

He saw a figure crouched in the diffuse dim light of the street lamp, tampering with the main gate of the salvage yard. Bob wanted to duck into the shadows, but at that moment, the figure looked in his direction and flinched.

For a split-second, Bob wished that Pete was still with him as there was no time to get to Jupiter. He gathered all his courage and ran towards the figure. He had to stop whatever the intruder was doing.

The figure saw Bob approaching fast. However, Bob was frightened. His feet slowed down his run without him being able to do anything about it. He thought he could hear his heartbeat pounding loudly.

The intruder was wearing a white hood and some sort of a white cloak... or was it a jacket? Bob couldn't quite place it. The huge hood also made it impossible for him to make out the head or even the face. As the intruder turned to face him, Bob was startled by what was on the front of the cloak. It was a huge red cross. There was no doubt about it—in front of him was the Knight Templar!

Before Bob could react, the knight turned and ran away in the opposite direction.

Finally Bob recovered. He briefly thought about alerting Jupiter, but then the intruder would be long gone. So he continued to run after him.

The intruder had already reached the next street corner and disappeared from Bob's sight. Bob tried to run even faster and also turned the corner.

Far ahead, he saw the hooded man moving away quickly in the glow of the street lights. He seemed to want to shake off his pursuer in the adjacent, winding side streets.

But Bob's ambition had taken hold. Certainly, he felt more comfortable hunting for books in libraries or anything associated with far fewer dangers. Also, he certainly didn't have the physical condition of a Pete Crenshaw, but he still felt fit enough to continue the pursuit.

Bob rushed across the street to the opposite sidewalk. In the meantime, the intruder had reached a large plot of land where numerous trees swallowed the light from the street lamps and plunged the area into darkness. In this dark place, the knight had disappeared and could no longer be seen, despite his light-coloured cloak.

Bob was startled. No matter how hard he tried to see, the figure in the white cloak was gone. Then he decided to keep running forward. He ran past the dense trees—and suddenly, he was taken off his feet in a flash without warning! Something had got in his way without him being able to dodge it in any way. When he landed on his back, he felt the pain. Then he banged his head on the hard ground.

Close to collapsing, he recognized the shadow of a dark, muscular figure above him, holding something white in his hands. Then the attacker jumped over him. Bob still tried to catch a glimpse of the knight by turning to his side. However, he only managed to see the slightly yellowish shimmering clouds, behind which the moonlight wafted. Suddenly, stars began to dance right before his eyes.

13. Friday the 13th

On Friday morning, a severe storm had hit southwest California with squalls and heavy rain showers. The Californian sky was as cloudy as the mood of The Three Investigators who were holed up at Headquarters. Strong gusts of wind swept across the salvage yard, and heavy rain pelted the roof of the trailer.

Pete switched on the radio in time for the weather report: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. Los Angeles. Severe thunderstorms has pummelled Southern California with damaging winds and heavy rain. Since the morning hours, several parts of the state have been experiencing torrential rain and wind at speeds of up to 130 km/h. A major landslide has occurred near Rocky Beach, causing minor injuries to three people."

Bob hung in his armchair and gave his friends a meticulous account of the previous night's incident, accompanied by clarifying questions from the First Investigator. Pete had the best view of the gigantic bump on the back of Bob's head. He was standing on a chair, holding a roll of duct tape, and frantically trying to seal the small leak in the roof of their trailer. "This won't work for much longer," Pete said.

"Jupe, when are you going to weld a metal sheet on the roof?" Bob asked. "You've been wanting to do that for a long time."

"Yes, Bob, I know how long this has been on my list." Jupiter puffed. "I'll do it when the rain stops, but now, we better get on with our case."

Suddenly, there was a deafening thunder outside. Pete flinched and dropped the roll of insulating tape, which missed Jupiter by a hair's breadth.

"Watch it!"

"Is that thunder starting again out there? That's the last thing my head needs today." Annoyed, Bob stood up and took a look through 'See-All'—the periscope built from old stove pipes and mirrors that led up through the roof of the trailer. This device enabled them to look over the piled-up junk and scan the area in the salvage yard around their trailer. What Bob saw was heavy rain forming huge puddles of water all over the ground. "Great. The thunderstorms are rolling in the sky and a hurricane is raging in my head."

"Your bump looks really bad," Pete told him with a grin.

At that moment, an all too familiar voice broke through the construction noise.

"Juupeeterrr! Where are you?" It was Aunt Mathilda. Through 'See=All', Bob saw her standing in the wet salvage yard, calling at the top of her lungs for her nephew. "There's a visitor for you!"

"That's all we need now—a visitor... in this weather," Bob groaned.

Jupiter looked up in amazement. "A visitor? Who could that be?" He got up and went to the periscope. "Let me see..."

Barely audible, Pete murmured: "It's obvious. Inspector Cotta with a warrant of arrest for us."

"You can save that, Jupe, you can't see a thing," Bob remarked. "A stack of tyres is blocking the view of the main gate."

"Juupeeterrr! You come out now as I'm going back into the office!"

“Come on, it’s no use, we’ve got to get out,” Jupiter muttered, venting angrily about the mountain of tyres and sight lines that had to be kept clear.

They left Headquarters through the Cold Gate. A few seconds later, they all stepped onto the salvage yard, carefully jumping over the puddles of water. Meanwhile, the rain had not let up and so they hurried towards the front gate. Bob struggled to keep up, paralysed by the deafening noise.

Aunt Mathilda was waiting for them halfway. “Ah, there you are. There’s a man at the gate who wants to talk to you.” In her hand were two brightly coloured umbrellas that she handed to the boys.

“You don’t know him?” asked Pete. “Then it’s not Cotta...”

Mathilda Jones’s admonishing look led one to expect the question of why the three of them were expecting the inspector, but Jupiter quickly thanked her and, as a distraction, praised her umbrellas and the array of colours, which, he thought was too garish for his taste.

Mathilda Jones shook her head uncomprehendingly, turned around, and hurried back to the yard office.

The three of them then walked towards the main gate and instantly regretted doing so.

“Oh no!” Pete groaned. “Not him again!”

Standing in front of the gate wearing a rain coat, like something out of a bad detective story, was a figure they knew well.

“Dick Perry,” Jupiter sighed loudly. “Nice to see you again so soon.”

“Don’t act so hypocritical... if you think you can fool me with that,” Dick Perry said as he pointed to the far corner of the salvage yard fence.

“What are you talking about?” Jupe exclaimed.

“Still trying to fool me, eh?” the fat detective replied. “How about you come out and see for yourself!”

With feigned astonishment, Jupiter opened the main gate and the three of them stepped out. Jupiter’s gaze followed the fat detective’s outstretched arm.

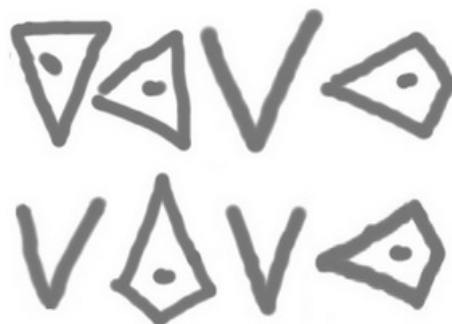
“You think that by making yourselves victims you can divert suspicion from yourselves, eh?” Perry said. “But you are mistaken. Dick Perry is not so easily thrown off the right track!”

“Just what are you talking about?” Jupiter repeated his question.

“Come on then,” the detective said and waved at the three boys to follow him. The Three Investigators followed him as he walked past the corner and turned to the side fence.

“Don’t pretend!” Perry said and pointed to the side fence. “You probably sprayed that here yourselves!”

The three of them stepped in front of the fence and looked with astonishment at a series of red characters—obviously left for them by the mysterious knight:



“Oh no!” Bob remarked. “There are more characters than before.”

“So what do you have to say now?” Dick Perry confronted them.

Confidently, Jupiter turned to the stocky man and said: “As we already know, your investigation skills are not even remotely comparable to ours, Mr Perry...”

Meanwhile, Bob pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and inconspicuously unfolded it so that Perry didn’t notice. He alternately looked at the graffiti and at the paper.

“What are you babbling about?” Dick Perry grumbled, glaring at the First Investigator.

“If you really wish to proceed with this, I strongly suggest that you re-examine your conclusions and do more profound investigation. Goodbye!” Jupiter pointed demonstratively at the old mouse-grey Ford parked at the side of the road.

Perry disagreed. “I already know what I’m doing, and I’m keeping an eye on you! Count on it!” Snorting, he turned and trudged to his car.

“Do what you want, but just don’t get in our way!” Jupiter yelled at him. He waited until Dick Perry had got in and drove off before he turned to his friends.

“Stay away,” Bob mumbled.

“What?” Jupiter asked.

“Stay away,” Bob repeated. “That’s what the Knight Templar wrote here!”

14. Jasper

“How nice.” Pete put on a feigned smile. Raindrops ran down his face. “How does that stupid knight know we’re after him anyway?”

“And most importantly, who we are!” Jupiter pinched his lower lip, as if captivated by the red characters in front of him. “Enough people should have noticed by now that we are interested in these graffiti.”

“So, I’m in favour of us having Dick Perry—” Pete began.

“And I’m in favour,” Jupiter interrupted firmly, “of going back to Headquarters first. It’s definitely too wet out here!”

Hastily, they ran back into the salvage yard and to the Cold Gate. After they were back inside the trailer, Bob fetched some towels from a shelf. “Perry is just looking for an opportunity to finally get one over on us. In fact, he’s not smart enough to find the real culprit.”

“But who else would have a reason to tell us to stay away?” Pete said as he was using a towel to rub his head dry.

“Someone we don’t have on the list so far and who has given me this ghastly headache.” Bob threw the towel into a corner and dropped into Jupiter’s chair. He turned from right to left, glancing at the computer monitor.

“We need to reconsider all the facts.” Bob pulled his soggy notebook out of his pocket and flipped it open. “It’s possible we have missed something.”

At that moment, the phone rang. Bob felt as if the top of his head was going to burst. Jupiter leaned past Bob and switched on the loudspeaker before picking up the handset.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter—”

“Jupiter Jones!” boomed the inspector’s well-known voice. “Listen, you three... since you probably don’t sabotage police actions at night for no reason, you probably note with interest that Mr Parker’s house was defaced last night after all!”

Thunderstruck, Jupiter suddenly stood upright. “What? But how?”

“The perpetrator must have struck sometime after we left.” Cotta took a short breath before continuing. “What do you know about these graffiti, Jupiter Jones?”

“Well,” Jupiter pressed on, “it seems to be some kind of... uh... cipher.”

“We’re also that smart!” snorted Cotta. “But what is the significance of these... these characters?”

“How many characters were there?” Jupiter skilfully steered the conversation in another direction.

“Um... characters?” The inspector sounded confused for a moment, then forgot his actual request and audibly leafed through a stack of papers. “Oh, I see. Yes. There are six this time.”

“And could you describe to us what the characters look like?”

“How do I describe them... okay, the first one is a vertical wedge... kind of reminds me of a kite.” Jupiter looked at Bob, who drew the character on his notepad. He was now more familiar with the various geometric characters of the cipher.

“The second is a ‘V’; the third, a triangle pointing downwards and with a dot inside it,” the inspector continued. “Fourth is... how should I describe this... a ‘less than’ symbol with a

dot in it. Then comes a triangle pointing right. Finally, the last character is a 'greater than' symbol with a dot in it."

Jupiter glanced at Bob's notebook.



Inspector Cotta now lent his voice more emphasis again. "Could you please tell me what you know?"

Jupiter watched Bob, who again took out his code conversion chart and looked for the characters. He quickly wrote the corresponding letters under the respective characters.

Bob jerked back involuntarily. Quietly and tensely, he said: "JASPER! So the whole message says: 'I have come back, Jasper'!"

"The dead boy from school!" Pete gasped.

Cotta had obviously overheard everything and barked loudly: "Who or what is Jasper?"

"We don't know that for sure," Jupiter claimed hurriedly and looked at Pete and Bob in consternation.

"Jupiter?"

"Uh..." the First Investigator answered quickly, "we still need to check something out..."

A sigh came through the loudspeaker. Cotta had known Jupiter long enough to realize that he would not get any more information from him now. In the background, Jupiter could hear a door being opened. "Uh, just a minute, Jupiter," Cotta said.

Someone seemed to have stepped in because Jupiter heard him say: "Sir, we have received several complaints from residents at Sheldon Street about youths causing problems there. Some annoyed callers insisted on speaking to you directly."

"Yes, thank you. I'll be right there, Kieran," Cotta replied in a lowered voice, then turned back to the telephone. "All right," he said. "Please bring your findings to the police department as soon as you can!"

"I promise, Inspector!" Relieved, Jupiter hung up.

"So Jasper..." Bob glanced at his notepad. "Fellas, the case is developing!"

"The case is developing?" Pete looked at him with wide eyes. "Someone returning from the realm of the dead is certainly not something that I like to see developing!"

After they had a short discussion on how to proceed from here, Jupiter and Pete drove with the MG to Santa Monica, where Mrs Smathers now lived. They hoped to learn more from her about her deceased daughter Chloe.

Bob got into his Beetle and rattled off the fastest way to Los Angeles. The roads were busy and his progress was slow. In this weather, everyone seemed to be shifting down a gear.

On his car radio, the news came on: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the news. The annual Golden Raven movie festival begins tomorrow in Los Angeles. The organizers expect numerous visitors and celebrities from all over the world. Governor Palmer will officially open the spectacle tonight... and the police are warning that traffic congestion is imminent."

The roads were busy and his progress was slow. In this weather, everyone seemed to be shifting down a gear. Everywhere large posters pointed to the legendary Golden Raven, which had been awarded once a year for generations and attracted all Hollywood greats and

celebrities from all over the world as well as countless press representatives to the city. During these five days, Los Angeles was in a state of chaos.

After more than an hour, Bob had finally reached the skyscraper that also housed the office of the *Los Angeles Times*.

He took the lift up and a short time later, he was standing in front of his father's open office door. Voices echoed down the corridor from everywhere, and someone kept running from one room to another. The clatter of numerous computer keyboards and the incessant buzzing of printers and fax machines added to the hustle and bustle.

His father sat behind his desk, unimpressed by the chaos around him, reading a competing paper. He only noticed Bob when he knocked on the door. "Bob?"

"Hi, Dad."

Mr Andrews folded up the newspaper and looked at his son curiously. "Well, I haven't seen you around here for a while. Come in... If you're coming in person, then I guess that means more extensive research is needed today... otherwise you just call." Mr Andrews grinned.

"You'd make a really good detective, Dad."

His father waved him off. "Nah, never mind. My job here is gruelling enough. What are you looking for this time? An escaped kookaburra?"

Involuntarily, Bob had to laugh. His father regularly asked about cases that happened years ago. "No," he replied, "not even an invisible dog, a sphinx or a gnome... This time it's just a Knight Templar painting graffiti in Rocky Beach."

"A Knight Templar?" His father looked at him in astonishment. "But that's from the Middle Ages. Our newspaper didn't even exist then!"

"There wasn't even Los Angeles then as well!" Bob pulled up a chair and sat down in front of his father. He dug out his notebook and flipped it open. "First and foremost, I'm interested in the fire at Rocky Beach High School twenty-seven years ago."

"Is this about those strange graffiti?" Mr Andrews pointed to Bob's notes.

"Right. They are found on several houses around the area."

"Hmm... I know. I noticed them yesterday morning when I drove past the bakery."

"Yes, Jackson's Bakery is one of five graffiti victims now—including Mr Jones's salvage yard. We think there must be more to it than that."

"And you think that the fire of that time has something to do with it?"

"Could be. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly. That's why I'm here." Bob grinned.

"Twenty-seven years ago, you said? Hmm... our database in the computer doesn't help us there. Issues that old haven't been digitized yet. That means you have to go to Mrs Grayson for the good old paper and microfilm archives. I'll tell you what—why don't you go down to the archives and search for the information you want and if you need more information, come back up. I've got to finish up a report now."

"Okay, Dad!"

Bob took the lift down to one of the two basement floors. Here, in a huge basement room, was the archives, where all the years of the *Los Angeles Times* were stored, as well as the editors' files. Many newspapers were bound in thick, large-format volumes, others lay in stacks on the high shelves. The collection was invaluable.

This was the realm of Mrs Grayson, who ran the archives, meticulously recorded the holdings and had been busy for years having old issues photographed and digitized. As Bob entered, the archivist looked up from her desk and took off her reading glasses.

"Hello, Mrs Grayson," Bob greeted her.

“Bob Andrews of The Three Investigators!” Mrs Grayson called out. “How nice of you to drop by! How can I help you?”

In a few words, Bob explained what he was looking for—but he could only roughly narrow down the date of the fire at Rocky Beach High School twenty-seven years ago.

“Yes, I have the microfilms of that year,” the archivist said with a smile.

Bob suspected that was exactly what was in store for him. He would have to use the big, old-fashioned-looking microfilm reader to read those reports.

Mrs Grayson led him to a shelf where there were numerous small boxes. In each box was a reel of microfilm with about two months of the *Los Angeles Times*. She handed Bob two boxes and led him through a fire door into the next room where the readers were.

Mrs Grayson switched on the clunky device. Bob sat down, slid the spool onto the left axle and threaded the beginning of the microfilm through the machine’s gears. A few turns later, he noticed that the image was displayed upside down on the large screen. “I’ll never learn!” he sighed, rewound the film and repeated the insertion procedure.

Mrs Grayson patted Bob on the back and wished him good luck.

Then Bob set to work and nervously operated the switches. The film ran forward in irregular jumps. Meticulously, he searched the jumble of articles on the monitor for the first report on the fire at the school. “I have to be systematic,” Bob said to himself. “The first article about the fire is guaranteed to be on the front page of the local section of Rocky Beach.” This actually made the search much easier and he soon found what he was looking for.

Several photos showed a completely destroyed masonry, whose charred wooden elements revealed nothing more than a large pile of rubble.

Bob had to lean forward to read the accompanying text:

... A devastating fire raged through Rocky Beach High School last night, burning the school to the ground. The old wooden structure of the building collapsed before the fire brigade arrived.

His finger wandered across the screen. “Aha, and here:”

... Under the rubble, police found the body of a student who had apparently been tied up. After initial investigations, the police are not ruling out the possibility that this was a gruesome ritual murder. Some traces—pieces of furniture and candles—may indicate that a cult session was held in the school’s basement vault where the fire started.

Startled, his finger jerked back. “Strong stuff,” he thought and had to take a deep breath. He had not expected such a dramatic story.

After a brief moment digesting the information, Bob looked intently at the screen again and saw two small letters in brackets at the beginning of the text: ‘JW’.

“What is that?” he thought and he went over to Mrs Grayson to ask her.

“JW?” the archivist said. “Aha! That’s the person who wrote the article. ‘JW’ is Jeff White and he still works for the papers today.”

“That’s great!” Bob remarked and he thought of going back to his father to see if he could help contact Mr White.

Bob returned the microfilm to Mrs Grayson, thanked her, and took the lift back up to his father’s office.

“Jeff White?” Mr Andrews remarked. “Yeah, of course! He has a real elephantine memory! I can give him a call now.”

Between numerous files and newspapers he found his speaker phone, and after dialling a short number, a grumpy but friendly voice came out of the small speaker. “Yeah?”

“Hello, Jeff. Bill Andrews here...”

“Bill! Gee, long time no hear, old buddy. Where’s the fire?”

Mr Andrews laughed. “That’s what it’s all about! There was a fire, and it was 27 years ago, at Rocky Beach High School. Do you remember that?”

“Um... yes... yes... let me try to recall...” For a brief moment, there was silence on the line. “I was at the crime scene then, yes, I remember. But... what have you got to do with that after so long?”

“I’ll pass you on to my son, Bob. There might be an exclusive story in it for you.” He winked at Bob and pushed to him the speaker phone.

“Bob Andrews? Of The Three Investigators?” The reporter’s voice came out of the speaker phone, audibly astonished. “Today is a day of surprises.”

“Hello, Mr White.”

“Just call me Jeff.”

“Okay, Jeff. I just have a few quick questions about the fire back then.” Bob had pulled his notebook out of his pocket and opened it. “Do the names Charlie Parker, Jimmy Sinclair, Ian Bush, Brianna Jackson and Chloe Smathers mean anything to you?”

“Hmm... So many at once... Let me think.” The journalist was silent for a few breaths. “Weren’t they the friends of the dead Jasper Doyle? Yes, yes, yes. A supposedly very close-knit clique that always hung together... just not that night, of all nights.”

“They weren’t together that night?” asked Bob in surprise. “Do you know why?”

“Nobody knows for sure. Let me try to recall... Jasper was at school doing something that remained unknown. The rest of them were at a campfire from early evening down at Seagull Rocks.”

“Aha! Seagull Rocks... Surely the police have checked that out?” Bob noted down everything that seemed important to him.

“Yes, of course. That very night! An inspector—Reynolds was his name, I think—questioned the students and also investigated the campfire on the beach.”

“Ah, good old Reynolds.”

“Do you know him?”

“You bet! He’s a good friend of ours. So... for the five of them, their alibi was airtight?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Hmm... really strange. So it’s still not known who Jasper was with in the school basement back then?”

“No. The case was filed away as unsolved at some point.”

“Very mysterious.” Bob thought for a moment.

“Does that help you?”

“I’m sure it does, Jeff, but I still have to put the pieces together...” Bob replied. “There’s one other thing... in your report back then, you mentioned possibilities of a ‘ritual’ or a ‘cult session’. Was there any evidence that Jasper had anything to do with the Knights Templar? That he was interested in medieval cults?”

“Knights Templar?”

Bob could literally feel Mr White thinking rather astonished.

“Hmm, no. However, someone reported at that time that they had found notes with some secret writing in Jasper’s desk. There was no follow-up on that matter, though. Why?”

“I’ll explain that to you as soon as we know more. In any case, you have helped me a lot, Jeff. Thank you very much.”

“If you have any more questions, get in touch.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you.”

“And remember my exclusive rights!”

“Sure, I promise!”

Bob hung up and looked at his father.

“So, did that help?” asked Mr Andrews.

“I think so. In any case, it is certain that the unknown graffiti sprayer is targeting the dead man’s best friends. But why?”

“Maybe they know more than they admitted to the police at the time?” Mr Andrews surmised.

Bob nodded. “It’s conceivable. Why else would they, of all people, be targeted by the Knight Templar?”

“And those notes that Jeff mentioned, do they have anything to do with your graffiti characters?”

“It can’t be any other way!” said Bob. “Someone knows that Jasper mastered the old cipher... and his friends certainly know it too.”

“But what is the unknown person’s purpose in confronting them with their past and smearing those characters on their houses?”

“He wants to remind them—to bring back the incidents of that time. That’s it! He wants to intimidate them, scare them with something to do with Jasper and with themselves—with things that probably happened that night!”

“But maybe the knight wants more,” Mr Andrews suggested.

“What?”

“Revenge perhaps? Revenge for Jasper’s death...”

15. Bob Discovers a Slip-Up

Jupiter and Pete had arrived in Santa Monica and found Mrs Smathers's house after a short search. It was in the middle of the residential area not far from the harbour. There were no parking spaces in the narrow side street, so they had parked the MG at the harbour and walked to her house through the pouring rain.

A warmly smiling elderly lady with enormous red curls had opened the door and first compassionately handed them a towel to dry off. Now they were sitting opposite her in the living room. In front of them was a framed photo that she had shown them. Jupiter told her why they were here. Chloe's mother listened with interest.

The photo showed a young woman, pretty as a picture. She was wearing jeans, had long, curly blonde hair and the same friendly smile as her mother. She was standing in front of an old Ford Mustang, leaning casually against the driver's door.

"Chloe was a great daughter," the old lady sighed. "This picture was taken a few days before... before her terrible accident."

"That driver was on the wrong side of the road, as we were told?" Jupiter said cautiously.

"Yes. She didn't stand a chance." Mrs Smathers reached into her cardigan and took out a handkerchief.

"Terrible..." Jupe remarked.

Mrs Smathers took a while to regain her composure. "But... you said that someone is apparently stalking her former schoolmates?"

"We don't know... but it seems so." Jupiter straightened up. "Mrs Smathers, we know that it is difficult for you... but... could we ask whether there are any private records of your daughter left? Old letters or perhaps even a diary?"

"They are actually still here. Up in the attic, there are some boxes with her old things. I've never had the heart to throw them away. They don't take up any space up there."

Jupiter took a deep breath. "Do you mind if we take a look at the boxes?"

"If you think that might help you... Come along."

Mrs Smathers rose and led Jupiter and Pete up a flight of stairs to the small attic. Only a single, bare bulb was on the ceiling, its light barely reaching the far corners. It was clear no one had been up here for a long time. Cobwebs hung everywhere between the sloping roof beams, the dust seemed millimetres thick.

"There, those are the three boxes." Mrs Smathers pointed to a corner where there were three faded brown moving boxes.

"They must be really old by now," Pete said quietly.

"Forgive me if I don't help you. The memory... uh... I don't feel in the mood now..." Mrs Smathers looked at them uncertainly.

"That's perfectly understandable," Jupiter replied reassuringly. "We promise to be careful and above all not to break anything."

"Then I'll go downstairs and rest for a moment. Just come down when you're done."

"Thank you very much. That's very kind of you, Mrs Smathers." Jupiter waited until the old lady had descended the narrow stairs.

"Here we go," he said and opened the first box.

Bob hurriedly back to his Beetle after leaving the *Los Angeles Times* building. It was still raining heavily, and although he had parked his car not far away, he was soaked to the skin.

Nimbly, he unlocked the door and dropped into the seat. Then he wiped his hair from his forehead and took off his wet jacket. With a glance at his wristwatch, he made sure he still had time. He had an appointment with Jupiter and Pete at Headquarters at half past eleven.

Once again he recalled his conversation with Jeff White. In his mind's eye, he saw Seagull Rocks jutting out into the Pacific just outside Rocky Beach.

Seagull Rocks was famous for its sand and rock-lined beach set against a backdrop of steep cliffs. About a hundred metres away was Seagull Rocks Resort, a popular destination for tourists. Here, one could rent luxury and fully self-contained beach-front lodges—all with an outdoor dining area and a gas barbecue for cooking. In good weather, one had a wonderful view of the ocean, the offshore islands and the ships passing by.

But something bothered him about the thought of the cliffs. He just didn't know what it was. However, he felt that he must be very close to getting some answers. He remembered how often Jupiter handled such situations by continually pondering and sorting out all the facts in his mind before eliciting conclusions out of them.

Bob didn't want to wait until half past eleven. Ambition had gripped him now that he had already found out so much. What was bothering him and what little piece of the puzzle he was still missing on this last stage of his investigation, he didn't know. But he would find out. With a quick decision, he started the engine and turned onto the freeway towards Rocky Beach.

As best as the traffic allowed, he drove out of Los Angeles and headed straight for Seagull Rocks. The windscreen wipers were working at full blast, but barely managed to get the water off the windscreen. Huge pools of water had long since formed on the road and Bob had to hold the steering wheel with both hands to keep the car from sliding.

Soon he saw the huge neon sign of the holiday resort blinking at him against the dark sky. He slowed down and steered his car into the car park next to the administration building.

From inside his car, Bob looked around the front of the building, and peered inside the lobby through the huge glass door. At the reception desk, a young man in a dark red uniform was typing something into a computer, otherwise, the lobby was empty.

Bob reached to the back seat, found his rain jacket and put it on. Then he got out and went on his way.

The scenery seemed eerie and surreal. With unrestrained force, the storm blew the rain in his face and Bob felt that he was barely making any progress. The ground beneath his feet was muddy and slippery. It was very cold and his pants were completely wet. Determined, Bob clutched his rain jacket tightly as he cautiously crept his way forward, step by step, ever closer to the beach. Lightning flashed out at sea followed by thunder. Nervously, he backed up.

"Just don't get rattled," he said encouragingly to himself and pulled the hood of his jacket even deeper into his face. "There's something not right about this story, and you can find out right here and now, Bob Andrews."

His gaze fell to wild waves whipping the water against the rocks in front and made it splash metres high. Even up here, he thought he could feel not only the rain but also the waves. Far above the roaring waves, he could still make out the deposits of ocean water on the rocks. So at the moment, it was low tide.

“Low tide... Rocks... Low tide and rocks...” he murmured. “Rocks that reach the water’s edge. Low tide? Hmm...”

Suddenly, another bright flash of lightning twitched from the sky. At that very moment, a realization came to Bob. “Yes!” he shouted. “I think I know what it is!”

Bob braved the rain and strong wind as he made his way back to the resort’s administration building. After taking out his rain jacket and hanging it on a clothes rack, he approached the reception. The receptionist, a tall and blond young man in his mid-twenties, looked up. On a small sign pinned to his lapel was the name ‘M. Nichols’.

Bob cleared his throat. “Excuse me, sir, do you have a phone book? I need to check a phone number.”

“Aaaargh!” The man stared at Bob and took a moment to compose himself. “Did something happen? My goodness, you look like an earth monster or something—”

“I was out on the beach.”

“What are you doing out there in this rain?” The man asked him.

Bob hesitated. “I wanted to check something important,” he said calmly. He wanted to pat the dirt off himself but it was useless. His pants were completely filthy, if not ruined.

“And for that, you venture out there in this weather? Boy, oh boy, you could get into a lot of trouble out there.”

“Yes, sir,” Bob said. “I won’t do it again... Please, I have to check a phone number. Do you have a phone book?”

“Yes, of course. There underneath the phone...” He pointed to the side of the reception counter.

“Thank you.” Bob walked over, and got the phone book. Very quickly, he found the number he wanted. Then he reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out the notes he made from the microfilm at the newspaper archives and checked a date. Then he dialled the number.

Immediately the phone was picked up and a woman’s voice answered. “Ocean Obs... Can I help you?”

“Yes... uh... My name is Bob Andrews... I’d like to speak to Dr Helprin!”

Pete’s fingers felt dry and dusty. So far the two of them had not been able to find anything exciting. They had been squatting in this gloomy, uncomfortable attic for over an hour now.

Jupiter had pulled up a rolled-up carpet and sat down on it. Then they had systematically searched through the boxes together.

There were old exercise books, some photos from school days, and love letters from Ian Bush, but without details relevant to their case.

“This is getting us nowhere, Jupe.”

“Just don’t give up. We still have one box,” the First Investigator replied. He had just opened it. But here, too, it did not look very promising. On top were some stuffed toys, old pyjamas, and baby shoes.

“It’s probably Chloe’s baby clothes,” Pete guessed.

Jupiter lifted the lid off from a smaller box and put it aside. “Hmm... but there is also something of a more recent date here. Look...”

“A cassette recorder... I used to have one of these.” Pete took the rectangular device. He lifted the flap of the cassette compartment and sighed in disappointment. It was empty.

“And what is this?” Jupiter held up a colourful cube. It consisted of many small cubes bearing different colours. “You can turn the individual rows crosswise... funny.”

"Looks complicated," Pete sighed. "But it has nothing to do with our case, so..."

"You think so? Count the individual little cubes. There are 3 times 9... 27." Pete counted and looked at his friend in confusion. Until he noticed that the corners of Jupiter's mouth pulled upwards. They bent over the box again. "An old record, more clothes," Pete mumbled. "Hmm... and here?... Children's detective stories."

"Wow, I even remember these—I used to read them!" Jupiter remarked.

Jupiter took one memento after the other out of the box and carefully laid everything on the floor. One of the books slipped off the small pile and flipped open.

"Jupe!" whispered Pete, startled. "Look! The book! That's not a real book at all. There's a compartment in it—"

"—For secrets that a girl prefers to keep to herself!" Jupiter completed the sentence.

"Like this package, for example." Pete picked up a small bundle that had fallen out. Something had been wrapped in newspaper and tied tightly—almost as thick as the book itself. "Shall we open it?"

Jupiter hesitated at first—but then he nodded. As Pete untied the knots and carelessly tossed the wrapping aside, he noticed the article on the inside of the newspaper—a report in the *Los Angeles Times* about the fire at Rocky Beach High School. They saw the photos of charred ruins, read the gruesome details and also the exact date.

The contents of the parcel turned out to be a brown envelope. "And what does it say?" Jupiter leaned over to Pete.

"It had the Smathers's old address and a return address to 'Keystone Film Labs'." Pete turned the envelope back and forth. Quietly he whistled through his teeth. "The letter was postmarked five days after the fire at the school!"

"It gets worse," Jupiter said, pointing to the envelope. "This hasn't even been opened yet!"

"I wonder what's in there?" Pete said.

"We'll know in a minute. Come on. We'll ask Mrs Smathers if we can open it."

A little later, Bob drove into the Jones Salvage Yard. Inwardly agitated, he walked towards the Cold Gate while the rain was now spraying him almost horizontally from all sides. At least that washed off some of the mud on his clothes.

He opened the trailer door and exclaimed: "Fellas! I think I've got it!" It seemed that Jupe and Pete had just come back a minute ago.

"Hello, Bob. What's happened to you?" Pete asked.

"Wait, I have to get out of this jacket first." He took off his jacket and threw it on a chair with a casual swing. It was too much of a swing. The chair tilted to one side and crashed to the floor along with its load. Cursing, he bent down to pick up the chair and hung his jacket on properly.

"Do you know what you look like?" Jupiter eyed him curiously. Bob's pants were littered with mud residue that still looked quite damp. Clumps of earth were also stuck on his shoes.

"A really strange question, Jupe." Bob sighed. "Here I am carrying all the traces of my life-threatening investigation openly in my clothes and our master investigator asks what I look like!" He pulled his completely soaked notebook out of his trouser pocket.

"Life-threatening investigation?" grinned Pete. "Did you fall into a pit?"

"If you only knew!" He carefully pulled apart the soggy pages of his notebook. "Come on Pete, please get me a cup of hot tea!"

As Pete got up to make the drink, Bob continued: "Now pay attention! In all probability, our four graffiti victims know the cipher. They used to use it themselves!"

"Logical conclusion, Bob," Pete commented, "otherwise they wouldn't be able to decipher the message on their house walls. So what's new?"

Bob leaned forward conspiratorially. "In the newspaper archives, I not only found the newspaper report, but also spoke to the reporter. He told me that Jasper's friends were not at school at all on the day of the fire. Supposedly, they were at a campfire at Seagull Rocks in the early evening."

"They weren't with Jasper at all?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

"Supposedly." Bob emphasized, and waited a moment, because Pete handed him a steaming cup.

"So... here you go. Your hot tea."

"Thank you!" Bob accepted the drink and continued with his report: "I was just out at Seagull Rocks."

Pete grinned. "Hardly to surf."

"Actually, I just wanted to have a look at the surf." Bob took a sip of his hot tea. "But then I took the opportunity to fall off the cliff."

"You what?" Pete exclaimed.

Briefly, Bob reported what had happened. His friends listened in amazement. "Well, at least now I know what Seagull Rocks look like at low tide!"

"Probably drier than you," Pete replied. "And you're risking your life for this information?"

"Do you think I wanted to throw myself into the depths on purpose? After all, it is now certain that even at low tide there are very few freely accessible spots on the beach! That's enough for a campfire, of course."

"What are you getting at?" Jupiter asked.

"Looking into the abyss, a dark suspicion came to me," Bob continued, "but since our First Investigator has admonished us often enough to subject every hunch to logic and scrutiny... I called Dr Helprin."

"The marine researcher?" The First Investigator, like Pete, could hardly stop marvelling.

"Exactly," Bob said. "Dr Helprin checked an old tide calendar for me. On the night of the disaster, the tide peaked at about 8 pm."

"So it was high tide!" Pete almost choked.

Bob crossed his arms triumphantly. "The newspaper article said that the fire at the school started around 9 pm. During that time and before that, there couldn't have been a single dry patch of beach below the cliffs!"

Jupiter nodded in agreement. "Because at high tide, the whole stretch of the beach was under water! That's logical. Oh, what am I saying, that's brilliant, Bob!"

Bob was pleasantly satisfied, which did not come solely from the steaming beverage. It was not unusual for Jupiter to recognize the most important connections by logical deduction and to explain them in seemingly endless monologues only at the end of a case. This time, however, Bob had discovered the facts and interpreted them correctly... and he had kept it brief.

"So the campfire was only possible after the fire at the school!" Pete marvelled, wincing at the same moment because a huge thunderclap made the trailer shake.

"Exactly, Pete," Bob said. "The five of them couldn't have been barbecuing there that evening!"

Pete grinned. "I can see the headlines: 'Junior Investigator Uncovers Striking Slip-Up by the Police'. Incredible!"

"Uh... by the way," Bob said, "according to Jeff White, the police officer in charge of the investigation back then was a certain... Inspector Reynolds."

"Chief Reynolds?" Pete gasped. "Oops! Sorry, Chief!"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully and commented: "Hmm... And this sinister... er, tiny carelessness on the part of the police provides the clique with their false alibi to this day."

"The mysterious knight must have found that out too," Bob suggested. "Either he wants to intimidate them into confessing, or..."

"Or he scares them so much," Jupiter interrupted, "that they eventually fall into one of the traps he sets!"

"Then the four of them are in serious danger!" Pete exclaimed.

"Right, Pete..." Jupiter rummaged in his backpack and pulled the envelope wrapped with the newspaper. "That's why we should take a look at this as soon as possible and then decide what next to do."

Bob looked at him in irritation. "What's that?"

"You mentioned that Miss Bennett described Ian as someone keen in cameras and photography. We asked Mrs Smathers if there were any old possessions of her daughter... and she took us up to her attic and showed us some boxes of her daughter's belongings."

"And in a box," Pete pointed to the parcel Jupiter was still holding up, "we found this parcel hidden in a dummy book and wrapped in a newspaper containing the report about the school fire."

"The sender is 'Keystone Film Labs' and the parcel is dated five days after the fire!" Jupiter opened the parcel and let the contents slide onto the table.

It was a reel of film.

Bob whistled through his teeth in surprise. "You read the newspaper report too? Didn't it say there was evidence of a cult session in the school basement? Is it possible that they... filmed it that night?"

"Surely Chloe and the others were curious at the time to see what would happen if they moved glasses or whatever!" Pete surmised.

"And Ian had unlimited access to the technical equipment needed for such recordings," Jupiter added, "since his father owned a TV shop! So what could be more natural than to record whatever they were doing?"

Bob looked at his friends speechlessly. Until now, he had looked for past records in the library and the newspaper archives... and now there was an old reel of film in front of them that had survived undiscovered in an attic for twenty-seven years.

At that moment, the news broadcast on the radio began: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the news. Los Angeles. Severe thunderstorms over California. Since the morning hours, parts of the state have been experiencing torrential rain and squalls at speeds of up to 130 kilometres per hour. A major landslide has occurred near Rocky Beach, causing minor injuries to three people."

Bob didn't listen. "But... surely this reel of film is some antiquated format like Super 8 or something. How are we supposed to look at something that old?"

Now the First Investigator smiled with pleasure. "Well, we have the—"

"—Flux capacitor!" Pete interrupted.

"The Novalux projector, Pete," Jupiter admonished him, "to be exact, the Novalux—"

"—T-800, yes, yes, I know!"

16. Kieran

“Splendid! What a wonderful machine...” Jupe said after he carefully positioned the nostalgic film projector on the table. He looked at it from all sides, and suddenly he stopped.

“The floor fasteners seem to have come loose during transport. Wait a minute...” Carefully he opened the lower cover. “Hello? Look... there is a narrow cavity here... and inside... there is a small reel of film taped to it.”

While he carefully detached the reel, Pete and Bob came closer.

“It’s just another old reel of film,” Pete remarked.

“Probably a private recording of some boring holiday or something,” Bob grinned.

Jupiter examined the housing of the projector. “Hmm... strange. The reel was down here in the little cavity. It can only be seen when the lower cover is opened.”

“We can take care of this later. I’ll put it here on the shelf!” Pete took the reel of film and placed it on a shelf next to a small travel alarm clock.

“Okay,” Jupiter agreed and proceeded to fiddle with the machine. “Now we put in Chloe Smathers’s film!”

Bob reached for the dimmer of the floor lamp. “I’m gonna go ahead and darken the place up.”

Jupiter nodded. “And you could flip over that map over there, Pete. Then we’d have a temporary screen so I wouldn’t have to go looking for one in the yard.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t want to go out there in this heatwave,” Pete said as he bent over the table to turn over the map of California hanging there.

Jupiter then clamped the reel of film in the projector and plugged the cord into the power socket. A few seconds later, he asked: “Everyone ready?”

Bob nodded. Pete switched off the lights and the trailer was turned into a darkened screening room.

“Roll it!” Jupiter pressed a small button and with a soft rattle, the Novalux came to life. “Wow,” he said softly. “Purrs like new.”

A slightly blurred image of a room appeared on the screen. Only a few candles illuminated it, so the three boys could not see how big the room actually was. However, solid walls could be clearly seen. A small table stood in the middle, and behind it was an old, crooked wooden shelf where nets or tarpaulins were kept.

Five young people sat around the table, clearly visible. Three looked directly into the camera, two sat with their backs to the viewer. Someone else had to be standing behind the camera. And suddenly there was a crack in the small loudspeaker of the projector. A completely over-modulated voice called out: “Ready? The camera is running.”

Another teenager approached the table and sat down on the sixth chair. “Chloe, are you ready?”

“Yes, Ian,” said a female voice. This had to be the girl with her back to the camera. “We can begin.”

“Madness!” whispered Bob. “If this isn’t actually the evening in question...”

“The boy who just sat down is Ian Bush,” Jupe murmured. “So the others must be—”

Jupiter was interrupted by the voice of the boy sitting to the right of Ian Bush. “Good, now let’s try to call Sinéad. Everyone join hands and turn your thoughts to her.”

The other five did as they were told. They closed their eyes.

“Sinéad,” the girl’s voice rang out again. She sounded calm and focused. “We are calling you. If you hear us, give us a sign.”

Suddenly there was a loud sneeze. The second young girl covered her nose. “Sorry,” she whispered, letting go of her neighbour and reaching under the table with her free hand. The table wobbled briefly and the candles on it swayed menacingly.

“Hey, Bri, watch it!”

“We ask you... answer us...”

There was a short silence. Then a low, ghostly howl sounded in the small room!

Startled, Pete backed up and looked at the screen in horror. And then Brianna sneezed another time.

Then it all happened very quickly. The girl had bumped the table, and it began to wobble again. This time, however, the candles toppled over.

Before the young people reacted, a candle had fallen over and rolled over the edge towards the third boy, who had remained silent until then. He did not grasp the situation quickly enough, the candle fell from the table and immediately the flame flared up.

Panicked, the boy jumped up. “My robe! It’s on fire!”

The girl, who had been sitting with her back to the camera, now jumped up as well. As she did so, the table finally toppled over. “Wait!” she cried. “She’s trying to make contact—”

“Watch out! Don’t touch the old blankets!” someone shouted. The boy with the burning robe had staggered back and tripped over something. In a wild panic, he tried to take off his burning robe, but had disappeared from the camera’s field of vision.

It was too late. A wall of fire blazed up in the right part of the room. That was where the boy had staggered out of the picture.

“Oh no. Now it’s really burning!” Ian Bush ran past the camera. “Get the stuff, quick! Pack it all up!”

Suddenly the boy in the burning robe reappeared, but without the robe. He too ran past the camera towards the exit.

One of the girls shrieked. “The camera! The camera!”

Suddenly, a phone rang. The Three Investigators flinched. It took them a moment to realize that it was their phone that rang.

“Goodness, my heart almost stopped.” Pete groaned and stared at the screen, on which flames were now flickering almost everywhere. Suddenly, the camera panned towards the floor. Someone had grabbed it and was running off. The camera was still recording.

“Always in the most exciting part!” Jupiter rose, paused the projector and reached for the loudspeaker, then answered the call. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones—”

“Jupiter!” Completely excited, Walter Bush interrupted him. “My son just called me! He was completely upset and was talking about a threatening letter! It had all those strange characters of the graffiti! He says he knows them and can read the letter!”

Jupiter opened his eyes and gasped. “Excuse me? What does it say?”

“I’m worried, Jupiter! He said maybe I could call you again so that you could—”

“Mr Bush, please calm down. What did the letter say?”

“What did it say? Oh, yes. That he should be at Seagull Rocks at 9 pm tonight.”

“Have you called the police?”

“Yes, just now, but they didn’t take me seriously. I spoke to Officer Doyle, but he just said—”

“What?” Bob jumped up. “Who was that? Officer Doyle?”

“Excuse me a moment, Mr Bush...” Jupiter looked at Bob uncomprehendingly.

Puzzled, Pete watched as Bob looked frantically from him to Jupiter, then back to him. The Second Investigator shrugged his shoulders and said: “Well, that was the officer I accidentally—”

“Oh man!” Bob stammered. “Why didn’t anyone tell me that! Don’t you notice anything?”

It was mid-afternoon, and the rain had subsided. The doors of the police car slammed shut.

Inspector Cotta looked at the modern, three-storey Rocky Beach High School building and guessed that they were being watched and overheard through a half-open window. He looked at his watch. It was half past three. Officer Doyle had got out next to Cotta and both walked towards the school building.

“I’ve never liked this modern box,” Cotta commented. “Do you remember the old school?”

“Not much.”

“It was beautiful, with its little towers and cosy classrooms... until the big fire back then —”

“And the school secretary claims that the graffiti look like those at the other houses?” Doyle, who looked bored and disinterested, interrupted the reminiscing inspector.

“Right... and it wasn’t there this morning.”

The two police officers circled the school building and strode towards the main entrance.

“It’s probably just a school boy prank. Kid’s stuff. We might as well attend to the problems at Sheldon Street and—” Doyle suddenly stopped and was rooted to the spot. He stared at the wall in front of them.



Cotta also saw the graffiti. He went up to take a closer look and used his finger to touch one of the painted characters. “What makes you say that this is a school boy prank?”

“Well, because... because...” Doyle stammered and then fell silent.

The next moment, the door of the main entrance opened and Ian Bush stepped out. With demonstrative composure, he looked at Officer Doyle. “Hello, Kieran!”

“Ian? I... what’s going on?”

Ian Bush leaned against the open door. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Doyle’s eyes narrowed to slits and he pointed at the graffiti. “You know that very well!” he hissed. “Why is my name written on the wall there?”

Inspector Cotta put on a surprised expression. “Your name? Does that mean that you can read these characters?”

“I... yeah... I... know them.” The officer stared into space. At that moment, he realized that he had been set up.

“But why didn’t you say that earlier?” Cotta continued. “You could have saved us a lot of guesswork!”

“Because...” Doyle began and then stopped.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob appeared behind Ian Bush.

“Quite simple!” said the First Investigator as they walked up to the two policemen. “Because then Officer Doyle would also have had to admit that he not only knows how to read the Templar cipher characters, but he also wrote them himself!”

“What are you three wise guys doing here?” Doyle snapped at them harshly.

“These three wise guys,” Cotta intervened, “once again have a fine eye for detail.”

“Unfortunately, we only realized this a few hours ago,” Bob said calmly, “how close we were to the solution without knowing it. The similarity of names between you and Jasper Doyle could have put us on the right track much earlier.” It still annoyed him that the officer’s name had been mentioned the night before at Charlie Parker’s villa, and he had not heard it.

Jupiter turned to Doyle. “Come on in, please. Brianna, Jimmy and Charlie are here too.”

17. All is Revealed

The school's archive room was darkened. All the shutters were down, and it was quiet—almost deadly quiet. Only the fluttering of the reel of film being played could be heard.

Jupiter switched off the Novalux film projector as Bob pressed the light switch. Those present squinted their eyes for a moment until they got used to the light again.

No one said a word.

Officer Doyle was the one who ended the silence after a while. The film had visibly affected him. "What... what was that?" he asked quietly.

Bob was leaning against the wall with his arms folded. "The camera kept running after the fire broke out until one of the teenagers grabbed it and took it with him as he fled the basement," he said quietly. "This film proves that it was not a murder, but an accident."

Brianna Jackson, the baker, sobbed quietly and pulled out a handkerchief. "Jasper had forgotten his backpack," she began wistfully, "and ran back into the room again. We wanted to stop him... but he didn't listen to us!" She sobbed.

Walter Bush, who like everyone else had been asked to attend the meeting by The Three Investigators, looked at his son, stunned. "Ian... you always told me that you were at the beach that night!"

His son looked past him with blank eyes and did not answer the question. "Jasper probably lost his sense of direction in the smoke. He must have bumped into the shelf and got tangled in those nets. He probably... didn't stand a chance."

Old Bush stood up and put his hands on his hips. "Why didn't you tell the police then? For twenty-seven years everyone has been puzzling over who was behind the alleged cruel ritual murder!"

"Oh father, we were just scared, bloody scared. Can't you understand that?"

"We walked to the beach, Mr Bush," Brianna began. "It was cold and we were frightened. Jimmy had the idea to light a campfire and calm us down first."

"But then Chloe made us aware," Charlie Parker, who had been sitting silently in his chair until then, now interjected, "that we would not only be held accountable for the burnt-down school, but also for Jasper's death."

The last person from that time, Jimmy Sinclair, was standing at the window. He had not been watching the film, but had been looking outside through a gap between the shutter and the window for minutes. Now he turned around. His face was streaked with tears, his gaze went past those present to the floor. "We swore that no one would ever tell about that night. Everything that could somehow connect us to it, we buried on the beach."

"Even the camera," Ian Bush interjected quietly.

"It's a heavy burden we've carried with us for twenty-seven years," Brianna said tonelessly. "We were all so young... We just didn't understand what had happened. It was for all of us... so sorrowful... so depressing."

Kieran Doyle wrestled with himself. "If I had known it was an accident then—"

"—Then you wouldn't have disguised yourself as a Knight Templar to intimidate the four of them with your mysterious graffiti," Jupiter now directed his gaze to Officer Doyle.

“And tonight you were going to get the four of them to confess to murder at the cliffs?” Slowly and with folded arms, Bob looked at the officer.

“Or did you want to throw them off the cliff?” Pete followed up.

“No. No! Nonsense. I...” Kieran Doyle searched for words. “I just wanted to...”

“You were aware that the clique used to write messages to each other using the Templar cipher.” As if to prove it, Bob pulled the code conversion chart out of his trouser pocket.

“You used this knowledge to put pressure on the four of them.”

The officer glanced furtively at his superior. Cotta had his brow furrowed and was looking at him sternly and expectantly at the same time.

“A few weeks ago, the old investigation file fell into my hands,” Doyle began. “It brought back memories of my older brother. But... something wasn’t right. Something didn’t fit the picture. It wouldn’t let me go. I didn’t know what it was at first.”

Bob knew the feeling. “The campfire! At that time, you can’t be at Seagull Rocks without getting your feet wet.”

“Right. I was convinced that the four of them—my brother’s best friends—had lied and knew exactly what had happened that night.”

“So you plotted revenge, disguised yourself as a Knight Templar and threw the four of them back in time with your intimidating message,” Pete added.

Doyle just nodded wordlessly and looked at the floor.

“The fact that we found the film, that it still existed at all, was pure coincidence.” Jupiter walked over to Bob and put a hand on his shoulder. “But without Bob’s excellent research, we would never have figured out the connections.”

“Speaking of research.” Bob glanced at Jimmy Sinclair. “Mr Sinclair, do you happen to be a descendant of a man named Henry Sinclair, who in 1398—”

“—Supposedly brought the Holy Grail to North America?” For the first time, a smile flitted across the man’s face. “No, the name Sinclair is really not a rarity—especially here or even in England, it is teeming with prominent namesakes!”

“It’s really incredible.” Ian Bush looked at his school friends. “Without any of us knowing, Chloe must have taken the film out before—”

“—Before we buried the camera on the beach,” Charlie Parker finished the sentence.

“Right, Charlie...” Ian Bush sighed.

“And Chloe had the film developed,” Jupiter continued. “Later, however, she decided not to open the envelope. Perhaps she couldn’t bring herself to watch the recording, but yet she did not destroy it. Had she watched it, she would have realized that she herself had the proof in her hand that it was all just a terrible accident.”

“So that’s why your sudden aversion to all things camera and film back then, Ian?” Walter Bush had stepped up to his son and put an arm around his shoulders.

At that moment, Officer Doyle’s emotions burst out and he began to sob. “Jasper was just a child after all! When I found out about the false alibi, all I could think was how could you all do this to him? Sacrifice him! My brother!”

“Did you seriously believe,” Bob remarked, “that this group of best friends would have sacrificed one of their own?”

Before Doyle could say anything in reply, there was a knock at the door. Inspector Cotta took a step aside and opened it. The school secretary stuck her head in and whispered: “I’m sorry to disturb you, but there is someone here who insists on speaking to Inspector Cotta. He says it is tremendously important.”

“Me? Then please ask him in!”

Jupiter, Bob and Pete gave each other astonished looks. They had not prepared for another visitor. As far as they were concerned, all those that were involved in the case were here.

The secretary stepped aside and a figure they knew only too well pushed his way into the room.

Excited as ever, Dick Perry waved his hands and finally pointed at Bob.

“Inspector!” Perry gasped. “At last I found you! Arrest Bob Andrews! I was watching him earlier! It was him who defaced the wall outside with those red characters!”

“Hmm...” Cotta pursed his lips, glanced briefly at Bob and then nodded at Dick Perry. “Quite excellent, Perry. What you have found out is actually true for once.”

Completely flabbergasted, Perry looked at him. “What do you mean?”

Cotta turned to The Three Investigators. “Bob, Jupiter, Pete... can you get a bucket of water and—”

“Ha!” Dick Perry interrupted him, waving his arms haphazardly again. “As if you could wash spray paint off with water like that!”

“Do you see an aerosol can around here somewhere?” replied Jupiter with a grin.

Pete demonstratively turned his trouser pockets inside out and held them away from his body with spread fingers. “Search us, Mr Perry... and I can guarantee that you won’t find an aerosol can on any of us!”

“Just...” Bob pulled out something from his shirt pocket and held it up to Dick Perry, “a tube of red water colour paint!”

Ten minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard. Pete parked his car in front of the yard office.

When the three of them were getting out of the car, a lean man in his forties wearing a trench coat approached them. Despite his narrow face, a stately double chin emerged from his shirt collar. The short black hair stood confusingly away from his head and his hectic winking indicated strong excitement.

“Er... excuse me,” the man said. “I’m looking for Jupiter Jones.”

“I’m Jupiter Jones. How can I help you?”

“I’m Sebastian Dawson,” the man said. “I spoke to you a few days ago regarding the film projector.”

“Mr Dawson!” marvelled Jupiter. “What brings you here?”

Dawson smiled uncertainly. “It’s regarding the Novalux T-800 again... I really want the projector, and I am prepared to offer you three hundred dollars for it.”

So much money for an old film projector? Jupiter hesitated and then said: “Perhaps I should have a word with my friends first...”

Mr Dawson nodded, as Juve pulled his two friends aside. “Fellas, what do you think?” he asked.

“Three hundred dollars!” whispered Bob. “Juve, what are you waiting for?”

“It’s a great offer,” Pete said. “Moreover, we have already used it for our case. What more do you want out of it? It’s not that there are more reels of film to play on it...”

Bob nodded in agreement.

“Then that’s settled,” Juve said and he walked back to Mr Dawson.

“Very well, Mr Dawson. Three hundred dollars—that seems a fair offer, and we’re happy to accept it,” Jupiter announced.

Bob and Pete visibly had to pull themselves together to avoid spontaneously bursting into cheers. Mr Dawson seemed to be quite content.

Pete took the box containing the projector out of his car's boot and handed it to Mr Dawson. The man put down the box, opened it and looked inside. "It looks like it is in perfect condition. Thank you very much..."

Mr Dawson reached into the pocket of his trench coat, took out a roll of \$50 notes and counted six of them. "Here you are—three hundred dollars." He handed the money to the First Investigator. "You really are a good salesman!"

"Thank you very much." Jupiter put the money in his pocket and tried not to smile too much. "Uh, by the way, we have tested the projector and it works."

"That's even better for me," Mr Dawson beamed. Satisfied, he took the box and headed for the gate.

He was less than ten steps away when it burst out of Bob: "Gee, Juve! That was some deal!"

"Three hundred dollars!" cried Pete enthusiastically.

Excitedly, The Three Investigators talked in disarray and congratulated each other on their sale. Had they waited a few seconds longer to cheer, they might have heard Mr Dawson say quietly as he left: "Those fools! If they only knew..."

"Just incredible..." Pete couldn't quite believe it yet. "He actually paid three hundred dollars for that old projector."

"Yes, fellas," Jupiter said. "This was indeed a very profitable business." Suddenly, the First Investigator stopped and his expression changed.

Pete looked at him questioningly. "What's wrong, Juve?"

Jupiter quickly took the dollar notes out of his pocket and held them against the sun one by one. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Everything is fine. For a moment I thought—"

"—That he gave you counterfeit money?" Pete added.

"You'll never know," Jupiter shrugged, "but these notes are real."

"There's no doubt about it!" Bob slapped him on the back laughing.

"This almost calls for a worthy Novalux party," Jupiter announced beaming with joy. "So I suggest we go to Headquarters and decide how we are going to celebrate the end of another successful case and our sale of the month!"

The Three Investigators were full of smiles when they entered Headquarters.

"What a day!" Bob remarked. "What a way to end another case... and we even earned \$295 dollars today!"

"You got that right," Pete agreed as he walked to the fridge, took out three cans of Coke and tossed two of them to his friends. By chance, his eyes fell on the shelf where he placed a reel of film next to a small travel alarm clock. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "Remember this reel of film that was hidden in the projector? We didn't get a chance to see what's in it."

"Never mind," Bob said. "We don't have the projector now."

"But it might belong to Mrs Sullivan..." Pete said. "Should we just return it to her?"

"It might not even mean anything to her. After all, the projector belonged to her grandfather," Jupiter said. "Well, to be certain, I'll check with her now."

Jupiter called Mrs Sullivan and she confirmed that she did not know anything about that reel of film, nor did she really care.

"That settles it," Juve said after he hung up. "She asked us to dispose of it."

"Yeah, I guess that's what we should do," Pete said as he tossed the reel of film into the waste basket. "I pulled out a bit of the film and saw that it was a recording of a birthday party

of some sort. Nothing important...”

18. Back at Jill's Place

It was late morning on the next day, a Saturday. The Three Investigators decided to go back to Jill's Place to celebrate another successful completion of a case.

Together, they set off in Pete's MG to downtown Rocky Beach. At that time, there was an amazing amount of activity. As expected, after the huge downpour the previous day, the temperature had dropped considerably, and the sidewalks were full of people.

Pete parked his car and the three of them went into the restaurant and saw that it was well attended. Almost all tables were taken, but the same table they had sat at a few days ago was still free. The three headed straight for it.

"Three Cocoa Specials, please..." the First Investigator immediately placed their order of drinks with the waitress—an elderly, chubby woman with red cheeks who introduced herself as Annie.

"Three Cocoa Specials coming right up!" Annie wrote the order on a little notepad. She paused for a moment and then said: "Oh, by the way, your drinks are on the house."

"Oh, that's nice!" said Bob. "Why is that?"

"If our Rocky Beach has three investigators who are a lot more skilful compared to the local police, then you have to give them their due credit," Annie happily announced. Then she leaned forward a bit and lowered her voice: "You are the famous Three Investigators, aren't you?"

Pete and Bob nodded at once. Only Jupiter was not sure what to make of this and was looking for the right words: "The way you say that, ma'am, it almost sounds like we're heroes or something."

Clucking, Annie waved away. It looked as if she was trying to fan the three of them. "Oh, you can't fool me, boys! I've been following every article about you in *Rocky Beach Today*. You should be proud! Without you, a lot of people here wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

Free drinks for being famous, Pete thought. This was going to be a great day!

Shortly afterwards, three Cocoa Specials were placed in front of them.

"To another successful case!" the First Investigator announced in a good mood and held up his glass. Pete and Bob joined in and raised their glasses as well.

"Now shall we get on to the main agenda?" Bob suggested.

Jupiter's belly agreed with a deep rumble. "You're right, Bob."

The First Investigator looked at the menu on the table, but his two friends did not make an attempt to reach for it and yet it would have been rude to just take it. Jupiter sighed. "You order first, I can wait..."

To the First Investigator's delight, Bob refused. "Thanks, Juve, but I already know what I'm gonna have—a Double Chisum with extra everything."

"And for me, it's the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese, and vanilla ice cream for dessert," Pete said.

Jupiter immediately grabbed the menu. "I'm afraid I'm going to have a harder choice." Pete could not wipe off a smile.

Very soon, The Three Investigators were enjoying their meal. After that, they ordered another round of Cocoa Specials and a huge snack plate.

Just as they finished, Pete's mobile phone rang and he looked at the display. "Now, who's this?" He pressed the answer button and held the mobile phone to his ear. "The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking."

"Hello, Pete," said the caller. "This is Hedy... Hedy Carlson. Remember me?"

"Oh hi, Hedy," Pete replied in surprise. "Of course, I remember you. We just met a few days ago!"

"Oh yes... uh... I would like to ask you something," Hedy said.

"Go ahead!"

"Uh... that day when I met you at the bakery, if you remember, I was there with my aunt Julia," she began.

"Oh yes," Pete said.

Hedy continued: "On our way back, I was telling her about The Three Investigators and how you have solved so many cases. Well, the thing is... Aunt Julia has a problem at her house. For the past few days, she has been hearing strange thumping sounds on and off at various places around the house. Well, I managed to convince her to engage you three to take on the case."

"Great!" Pete exclaimed, although only he himself really knew whether his excitement was for a new case or for meeting Hedy again. "I tell you what, Hedy. I'm now with Jupiter and Bob. I need to discuss with them, and I'll call you back for more details in a short while."

"Wonderful!" Hedy said happily. "You can call me on my mobile phone!" Then she ended the call.

Pete quickly briefed his two friends about what the phone call was about. The three of them agreed to look into this case, and Pete called Hedy back to arrange for a meeting.

"All right," Jupe announced after that. "Let's go, fellas!"